理想の上司

5

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扉の向こうから姿を現したのは
二人の女である。前を歩くのは、
「自称ウップサーラ王国第二王女
フレア・ウップサーラ
後ろは護衛の女戦士・**スカジ**

フレア姫を見た時、最初に目が
行くのがその髪型だろう。
青みがかった銀髪という、
不思議な色合いのその髪を
ばっさりと切り揃えていた。

スカジはグルグルと回転を始める。
その回転の勢いを乗せ、
逃走を図る巨大群竜をめがけ短槍を投げ放つ。
さらに後ろ回し蹴りの要領で、
放たれた短槍の石突きを蹴ったのである。

ボナ王女の本心を見抜けないほど、
善治郎も鈍くはない。

「ええ。期待しています。
フランチェスコ殿下にも。
もちろんボナ殿下にも」

と、お土産の対象がフランチェスコ王子だけでなく、
ボナ王女も含んでいることを明言してやる。

Prologue: The Sign of a Ship at the Seaport

Valentia had the biggest harbour in the Carpa Kingdom.

This famous large city was technically ruled by the “Duke of Valentia”, but most of the time, it was actually registered to be under the direct control of the monarch.

And this extended to Aura as well, the current Queen.

She was the Queen and the Duke of Valentia at the same time.

After all, Valentia was the largest commercial harbour in the Kingdom as well as an important source area for salt. Depending on the season, it sometimes had an even greater circulation of people, goods and money than the royal capital.

It stood to reason that the previous monarchs took the view that only an extremely trustworthy somebody with adequate skill and personality could be entrusted with that region.

Having said this, Aura actually had no one to appoint, even if she wanted to, since all members of the royal family besides her died in the previous war.

Anyway, the city of Valentia was currently under the nominal control of Queen Aura, because of these circumstances. Needless to say, she was extremely busy with her duties in the capital, so she obviously had no time to take its governance matters into her hands. All affairs in Valentia were actually managed by the appointed “governor”.

Normally the governors of detached lands used their appointments to illegally amass a fortune and build a private

army and nothing else, but the Carpa Kingdom was relatively free from that worry.

After all, the bloodline magic of the Carpa Royal Family was “Space-Time Magic”. That meant they could use “Teleport”.

As such, the governor would naturally hesitate to do anything illegal under these circumstances, in which a trusted retainer of the Queen could suddenly drop by at any moment.

In Valentia the majority of money and manpower was obviously expended to the harbour.

Numerous piers extended from a beautiful terraformed coast. Each of them was solidly built from stone and were wide enough to allow large dragon carriages to pass by each other without any problems.

Moreover, the water was so deep that even the big ships from the North Continent with a very large draft could moor with no problems whatsoever.

And on top of that, breakwaters were constructed off the coast behind one another in a three-layered fashion, so that they were overlapping by turns. That prevented waves from advancing into the harbour, but at the same time, it allowed an easy entry and departure for ships.

Thanks to that, not a single harboured ship had capsized in the dock of Valentia in the last decades, not even during the typhoons of the rain season.

The large lighthouse standing at the edge of a headland topped the whole thing off.

It was a columnar building, looking like a candle, with an height that would pass into oblivion amongst the buildings of a

modern metropolis, but overwhelmed here, since there was nothing on par with it.

The piers, the breakwaters and the lighthouse.

All of them were beautifully built from stone to such an extent that anyone, who saw the spent budget and manpower, would feel giddy. It was not for nothing that it was the biggest harbour in the western part of the South Continent.

Even now, Valentia was overflowing with activity.

Accompanied by a cleared up blue sky and a pleasant sea breeze, a great deal of sailors and dockworkers were shouting and running around sedulous in the harbour.

“Please let me through, I got an urgent delivery!”

“Hey, are these really the barrels with the dried meat? They’re rather light.”

“You there, no fighting on the pier! Otherwise you get the sack.”

One wrong step in this buzzy atmosphere could lead to a quarrel and soldiers armed with short spears were mediating in loud voices.

The guards in the capital were only wearing leather armours, too, but in consideration for the nearby sea, the soldiers here just wore shirts and trousers too thin to expect any protection.

And on a closer look, it became apparent that the spearheads of their equipped spears were not reflecting the dazzling sunlight at all. Most likely, the spears utilized sharpened dragon bones instead of iron.

When guarding a harbour, they were naturally exposed to the sea breeze, but it was not unusual either that they sometimes

got dashed with sea water. Therefore iron would start to rust in no time, unless maintained effortful.

Roughly speaking, it was a specific equipment for coast areas in a way.

Another thing worth mentioning was that amongst the dockworkers, who carried stuff around on the piers, were a few that used a “handcart”.

On sale at the merchants of the capital quite recently, that wooden gadget was quite valuable in the harbour, where large amounts of goods had to be moved around on a daily basis. The ground had to be at least somewhat even to use the handcart, which only had small wooden wheels, but fortunately enough, Port Valentia fulfilled that requirement completely.

The handcart was sparsely showing up right now, because of its high prize, but at this rate it might only be a matter of time until it became a regular equipment at the harbour.

In fact, its usefulness was painfully obvious once you used it. The majority of dockworkers worked up a good sweat by shouldering wooden crates or hemp bags. In contrast, the dockworkers with a handcart easily pushed a multiple of that weight, so its utility was beyond question.

When the dockworkers were carrying a heavy cargo, they were sweating all over their bodies and could only look in front of them. The handcart dockworkers, on the other hand, could take it easy and look around while they pushed the cart.

Therefore it was probably inevitable that it was someone pushing a handcart noticed a certain something first.

“Hm? What’s that?”

The young dockworker looked beyond the horizon and stopped in his track.

“Hey, what’cha doing? Don’t stop dead, it’s dangerous.”

Behind him, a middle-aged worker carrying a largo cargo over his shoulders called out to him, whereon the young dockworker started walking again while replying to the man walking behind him.

“Ah, sorry. It’s just, I saw an unfamiliar ship over there.”

“Huh? An unfamiliar ship?”

Without stopping in his track, the middle-aged worker, incited by these words, looked in the same direction.

Unfortunately however, he only saw the wide open sea like always.

“Dun see anything.”

“No, it’s there. It was just a mast appearing above the horizon, though.”

Thereat the middle-aged worker nodded his assent once, still carrying the large hemp bag over his right shoulder.

“Oh right, you’ve good eyesight.”

“Yes, it’s my only redeeming virtue. Anyway, it must be one heck of a big ship when I can make out its shape so clearly, even though its barely above the horizon. I’ve never seen such a big ship before.”

“Oho, I see. Then it’s probably a large sailing boat from the North Continent.”

“Large? You mean it’s even bigger than the sailing boats docked here?”

“Yeah. Whether fore-and-aft sail or square sail, the sailing ships here only have one mast. But you see, the North Continent has large ships with three masts.”

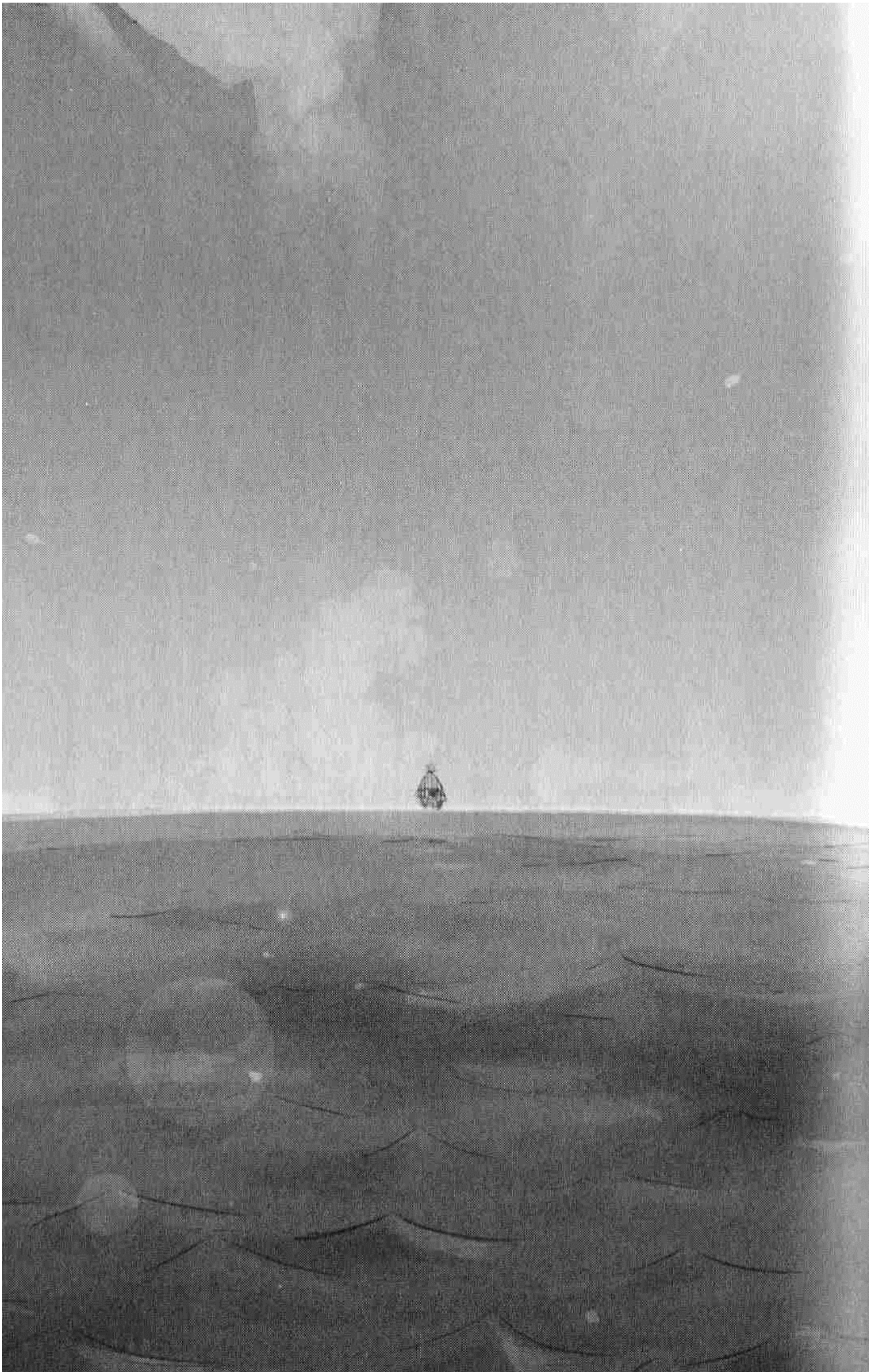
In order to prevent the forehead sweat from running into his eyes, the middle-aged dockworker wiped the sweat with the back of his left hand as he said that. Then he narrowed his eyes to slits and looked at the glistening sea to confirm it with his own eyes.

With his eyesight however, he could barely make a small dot out in the distant sea.

Left with no other choice, he asked his young co-worker with the superior eyesight.

“Can you tell?”

“Hmm, from here it’s a bit hard… wait, I see it! Ah! It really has more masts. One, two, three… four? What? It has four, not three.”



The young dockworker tilted his head puzzled as he spoke, whereupon the middle-aged dockworker was baffled.

“FOUR!? Are you sure!?”

Surprised by the shocked question of his senior, the youngster looked carefully at the ship again, but the number of masts still counted the same.

“Yes, I am. It definitely has four masts.”

The dockworker of middle age acted fast upon hearing his answer.

“Here, take this!”

As soon as he said this, he threw the hemp bag from his shoulder onto the wooden crates loaded on the handcart of the young dockworker.

“Hey! Don’t do that! The wheels will crack when it’s overloaded! Do you know how many days I’ll have to work for free if the cart breaks?”

The youngster protested desperately, but the old stager was too flustered to pay it any mind.

“Dun have time for this! I’ve gotta report this to the governor! If it breaks, you can blame it all on me!”

“The governor? Doesn’t he have a lookout on the lighthouse? I would say they notice it way earlier than me.”

“Just to be on the safe side. Later!”

After saying that, the middle-aged dockworker ran off at full speed.

He passed through the crowded pier in no time while repeatedly saying “Please let me through!”.

Left behind, the young dockworker stood in front of his now heavily laden cart with a gaping mouth and no clue about what was going on.

Who could blame him? Unaware of the circumstances, it only appeared to him as if the middle-aged man had abandoned his work in a grand fashion.

However, anyone, who knew what a “large sailing ship with four masts” signified, would sympathize with his action.

The shipbuilding was kind of inferior on the South Continent, so small ships with one mast were the norm.

Basically all large ships with three masts could be considered intercontinental cargo vessels from the North Continent. And even there, the ships were something like a leading-edge product and accordingly expensive. If someone from the plebeain could purchase it, it was because he was a wealthy merchant with influence all over the country.

On this basis, it was easy to imagine how significant a ship with one more mast, namely four, was. It was truly the cream of the crop and a state property that was not available to the private sector. Moreover, even on the North Continent, the only countries that could build and maintain these ships were major powers with a development above average.

And now, such a four-master had appeared in the harbour of Valentia of the Carpa Kingdom.

At the same time, that meant that a key figure of a major power on the North Continent had come over.

* * *

The official name of the four-master that had shown up in Valentia was “Yellow Leaves”.

It was the state-of-the-art ship from the Uppsala Kingdom, a country in the northern part of the North Continent. Although the kingdom was known for its advanced technology, it had only one more four-master besides the “Yellow Leaves”: The “Dead Soldier Claws” was the flagship of their naval force.

Standing on the deck of that large ship, Freya Uppsala seemed moved as well as relieved when saw land again at last after approximately one hundred and twenty days at sea.

“Looks like we can finally put ashore again.”

“Yes, Milady. It is a magnificent harbour. Our ship will be able to dock there without problems.”

“Indeed. But you know, Skathi, I am the captain right now, not a princess. Please do not get it mixed up.”

The girl named Freya Uppsala had her silver-blue hair cut short around her neck and kept her eyes on the port of Valentia before her while she replied to the tall female soldier standing behind her at an angle.

“Yes, my apologies, Captain.”

The tall female soldier known as Skathi showed a soft smile and bowed a bit.

Just like her name implied, Freya Uppsala was a princess from the Uppsala Kingdom. She admittedly had no claim on the throne, because women were not allowed to ascend the throne in the Uppsala Kingdom, but she was nevertheless a distinguished figure in the country.

Her straight hair had a silver-blue colour, her ice-blue eyes tended to give off a cold impression and her skin was unrealistically white.

That mysterious beauty substantiated her dignity as a "princess from a country in the north". She would surely be quite a sight if she were to put on a dress and jewellery.

But right now, Princess Freya was wearing men's clothing, which were kind of gorgeous, but prioritized functionality above anything else, and her beautiful hair, which originally had extended to her waist, had been cut drastically around her neck.

She was "cross-dressing" in order to act as the captain of the "Yellow Leaves".

According to the traditional practice, the people of the Uppsala Kingdom also known as svenskar regarded their ships as women. Becoming a captain could therefore be compared with marriage, which made it necessary that the captain was a man. Consequently, a woman always had to "cross-dress" on top of the ship if she wanted to be its captain.

Needless to say, the cross-dressing was nothing but a formality and they did not have to masquerade as a man for real.

For that reason, Princess Freya simply was a "beautiful girl in men's clothes" right now.

If anything, she was revealing her female curves from top to bottom by wearing the male garments so casually.

When Princess Freya turned around, she called out to her trusted retainer standing behind her.

"So, do we know where this harbour belongs to?"

“Yes. Judging by the distance we travelled today and the star constellation last night, we most likely arrived in the Carpa Kingdom.”

“The Carpa Kingdom…?”

Princess Freya inclined her small head puzzled, searching her mind for it.

Information from the South Continent barely reached the Uppsala Kingdom, since it was situated in the far north of the North Continent. By way of comparison: It was the same as asking an European about Asia during the Age of Discovery.

Having said this, Princess Freya had become the captain of this ship of her own accord and was more knowledgeable about the South Continent than the average person from the North Continent.

“If I remember correctly, it is a country in the western part of the South Continent? Seems we have drifted from the course more than we thought.”

Having recalled the matching memory from the back of her mind, Princess Freya discerned that, whereupon the tall female soldier consented with a brief nod.

“Yes. I have heard that it is a prominent major power there. It is a bit inconvenient that our countries have no direct diplomatic relations, but I have heard nothing bad about them. At least we can assume that they will honour the ‘Sea Codex’.”

The “Sea Codex” was the conception that those living on the sea supported each other.

Its contents were nothing special. In short, it encompassed things like allowing even unknown ships to dock and embark in an harbour as long as there was free space.

After all, the seamanship in this world was hopelessly inferior compared to modern Earth. They technically devised a course before departing, but it was exceptionally unlikely that they travelled according to plan.

Sometimes they ran out of provisions, because the travel took longer than expected. Sometimes they lost crew members to an illness at sea. Sometimes they got into an unforeseen storm and veered completely off course. Things like that happened all the time.

Due to that, the most important thing was to be allowed into port during an emergency.

Needless to say that did not apply to recognizable pirate ships or ships from clearly hostile nations.

“It seems like I will be able to grant my crew a long-awaited shore leave then. They definitely earned it, since I have put them through a lot.”

As the princess was considerate of her crew, the female soldier consented, but also contradicted her.

“Yes, indeed. However, Captain, please apply the same attention to yourself, too. If I may say so, your stamina rather ranks at the bottom end from all our crewmembers.”

“Thank you, Skathi. But I am fine. There is barely anything for me to do on the ship after all.”

“That goes without saying. The ship would be done for if something were to happen to its captain.”

Her answer was by no means aiming to be exaggerating or symbolic.

The shipbuilding on the North Continent was around the same level as the one on Earth during the Middle Ages, but varied on

two points: It had an advantage over Earth, but also a disadvantage.

The advantage was obviously the existence of “magic” in this world.

Especially the “Drinking Water Treatment” magic revolutionized the sea travel.

Throughout the history of Earth, the greatest problem for sea journeys had always been the provisioning of drinking water.

In this world however, drinking water could be obtained by treating salt water with magic, so they were truly worlds apart from each other in regards to water matters.

In case of the “Yellow Leaves”, Princess Freya was casting the “Drinking Water Treatment” magic in order to supply water.

Considering that fact, it became clear that the female soldier wasn’t joking or anything when she said that the ship would be done for if something were to happen to the captain.

Of course there were other practitioners of “Drinking Water Treatment” besides Princess Freya aboard, but even if all of them were to pool their strengths, they would barely treat enough salt water to keep them alive with restraint.

If something were to happen to herself, the whole crew would die of thirst before long. Princess Freya properly acknowledged that heavy responsibility, so she had paid heed to the warning of the veteran sailors and female soldier, and stayed out of danger during their more than 120-day voyage.

Due to that, she was not physically, but mentally exhausted, though.

“Anyway, the sea and sky are really blue on the South Continent.”

Narrowing her ice-blue eyes to slits, Princess Freya gazed at the merging blue colours on the horizon.

“Certainly. A bit too bright for us, perhaps, since we are used to the northern sea.”

As implied by her, the sky in their homeland, the Uppsala Kingdom, was covered by massive gray clouds and the sea rarely appeared blue either.

And the heat was foreign to them as well, even though the people of the Carpa Kingdom no longer conceived it as hot, since the hottest season of the year had passed.

To say nothing of how they seemed to get dizzy from the heat and force of the sunrays as they exposed themselves directly to it on top of the deck of the ship.

The refreshing sea breeze was at least a glimmer of hope, so that they had no trouble breathing.

Except for varying intensities, the tall female soldier as well as the well-built sailors tending to the sails had all dark red tanned skin, but on a closer look, you saw white arms and necks under the sleeves and collars, respectively.

Amidst that, Princess Freya revealed skin so white that it seemed out of place. Maybe she rarely ever left her own cabin or she did not tan that easily?

Her natural white face was completely untanned while she kept her gaze fixated on the nearing harbour of Valentia the whole time.

“Amazing. Not even the North Continent has many harbours as imposing as this one.”

“Indeed. I never imagined the South Continent to have such an impressive harbour either.”

Princess Freya curtly nodded her assent to the learning-never-stops speech of the female soldier without averting her eyes from the sea in front of her.

The affiliations of the North Continent and the South Continent could be described as “South-Magic-North-Technology”. It meant that the South Continent had magic developed countries whereas the North Continent had technology developed countries.

On the South Continent a unique “bloodline magic” was practically essential for royalty, but on the North Continent, royalty with a “bloodline magic” were actually scare.

As part of the Uppsala Royal Family, Princess Freya had inherited a large amount of magical power, but there was no special power in their blood, so her family could only use the common “Four-Element Magic”.

But on the other hand, the North Continent had the edge on technology. Be it shipbuilding or ironworking or architecture, they were one step ahead in every department.

Priding oneself on that entailed “arrogance”, whereupon you started to look down on others.

Princess Freya realized that her thoughts had unknowingly strayed from the right path and she took a deep breath for a change of mind. At that moment:

“A large shadow approaching from behind! It’s a Sea Dragon!”

The young sailor in the lookout reported an emergency with a loud voice.

“Milady!”

The sudden turn prompted the female soldier to call her master erroneous again, but Princess Freya just ignored it, since she knew how foolish it would be to correct her in such a situation.

“The storm last night had carried us into his territory, so it must have chased after us.”

A Sea Dragon. It was a major disturbance to seafaring that didn’t exist on Earth.

Even in the old days on Earth, some ships sunk from colliding with large whales or people were eaten by sharks after falling off the ship during a storm, but these were no match for the hazard of a Sea Dragon from this world.

First of all, its size was different. Of course it would be considered small when comparing it to the large tankships or nuclear- powered aircraft carriers from modern Earth, but at least in this world, there was no ship bigger than the largest Sea Dragon yet.

Moreover, the Sea Dragon had a distinct territorial behaviour, so it was terrifyingly hostile towards anything roughly as big as itself that entered its territory.

To such an extent that it often got too exasperated and chased after its prey even outside its territory.

Having said this, it definitely was an exception that it continued its chase until the following day like this time.

“Milady, we still cannot use the large crossbow on the poop deck, because of the storm last night.”

Princess Freya made an immediate decision when the female soldier prepared for battle.

“Yes, I know. The defence forces of the harbour would surely have an easy job dealing with a Sea Dragon of this size, but it

would be anything but desirable to cause them trouble right from the beginning.

You do not need to finish it off, just chasing it off will suffice. Do not be reckless, Skathi."

"As you wish."

Allowed to engage it, the female soldier saluted with her right fist held up before her left chest, then quickly ran off on the deck.

The ship was rocking quite a bit, because they were outside the breakwaters, where the waves were still high, but she moved on the deck as if she was on the ground.

"Bring me my spear!"

The female soldier let the salty air vibrate through her voice and the sailors answered her right away.

"Yes, Victoria-sama. Here you go!"

"Good!"

She grabbed the spear offered by a bearded sailor as she ran past him.

The spear was a little bit longer than one metre at best and had a flavescent milk-white colour. For its small size, it was actually rather heavy.

Its colour and weight were proof that this spear was made from a polished tusk of a Sea Elephant.

A wooden spear with an iron head, like it was used ashore, was extremely unsuited to use for a throwing attack against Sea Elephants or Sea Dragons living in the sea.

Of course there was the issue with fugacity, because it rusted from the salt water or decayed from sponged water, but the

crucial problem was that the trajectory of the thrown spear curved in the water, because the specific gravities of the "floating wooden shaft" and the "sinking iron spearhead" were too different.

"Move it. I will handle it."

"Yes!"

"Please do."

The female soldier had reached the rear deck in no time and declared that, whereupon the gathered sailors made way.

Without slowing down in her full-speed sprint, she kicked the ground and jumped onto the poop deck.

She looked down onto the Sea Dragon as she stood there with the spear in her right hand, and mumbled.

"So that's it. Guess I'm lucky. I should be able to deal with it."

The Sea Dragon raised its broad green back and large neck out of the blue sea, baring its fangs.

Its kind was called "Long-neck Dragon". As a blessing in disguise, it was a relatively small specimen of its kind. Considering that one would have to "look up" to its head from the deck if they were dealing with a large Long-neck Dragon, they definitely had a stroke of luck here.

Anyway, the dragon approached quickly by making use of its four fins in the water. It was such an overwhelming sight that even the experienced seafarers familiar with the life-endangering sea travel, winced.

"Fuh…"

Standing on the poop deck, the female soldier kept her gaze fixated on the Sea Dragon below her while she grasped her

spear near its head and placed its butt end onto the bridge of her right foot.

On a closer look, it became apparent that her leather shoe had a thick dent, into which the butt end of the spear fitted perfectly. The female soldier then used her right hand to balance out the spear, so it wouldn't fall over. Before long, she took away her hand and the spear stood upright on top of the bridge of her right foot without toppling.

That looked like a street performance taken by itself, but needless to say, this was hardly the time to perform a trick.

"Puh… Hah…"

After bringing her breathing under control with a few deep breaths, the female soldier opened her eyes wide-open and lifted her right foot in a single continuous movement.

Upwards, forwards, downwards. If you will, it looked like the motion of a high front kick or roundhouse kick from Karate or Kickboxing.

This sequence of movements raised the spear, standing on the bridge of the foot, tilted it to a horizontal position and then launched it.

It was a kicking spear technique, which was passed down from generation to generation in the north of the North Continent.

Some people say the technique arose from when the people in the north tried throwing a spear with their foot instead of their hand because they wore gloves so thick that they could no longer move the individual fingers. Some others claim that it was devised to make up for the shortcomings in range peculiar to the physically weaker female soldiers.

Either way, it goes without saying that it was not an ordinary technique.

Launching the spear deliberately with the foot was ineffective as well as impracticable.

However, the inherited techniques coupled with the practice of talented people improved the efficiency and made the impracticable practicable.

The Sea Elephant tusk spear, launched from the right foot of the female soldier, flew straight and faster than an arrow, piercing the head of the Sea Dragon.

“GRAAAR!”

After a short cry, the Sea Dragon slackened his long neck and let it drop onto the water surface.

One shot one kill. She truly finished off the Sea Dragon with a single spear.

The Long-neck Sea Dragon was a large creature, but its head was relatively small and it had been far out at that.

Hitting that very head with a spear kicked by a foot and even delivering a fatal blow to the skull in one hit was truly a brilliant feat. The ship’s crew went nuts when they witnessed the skills of the female soldier.

“Wow!”

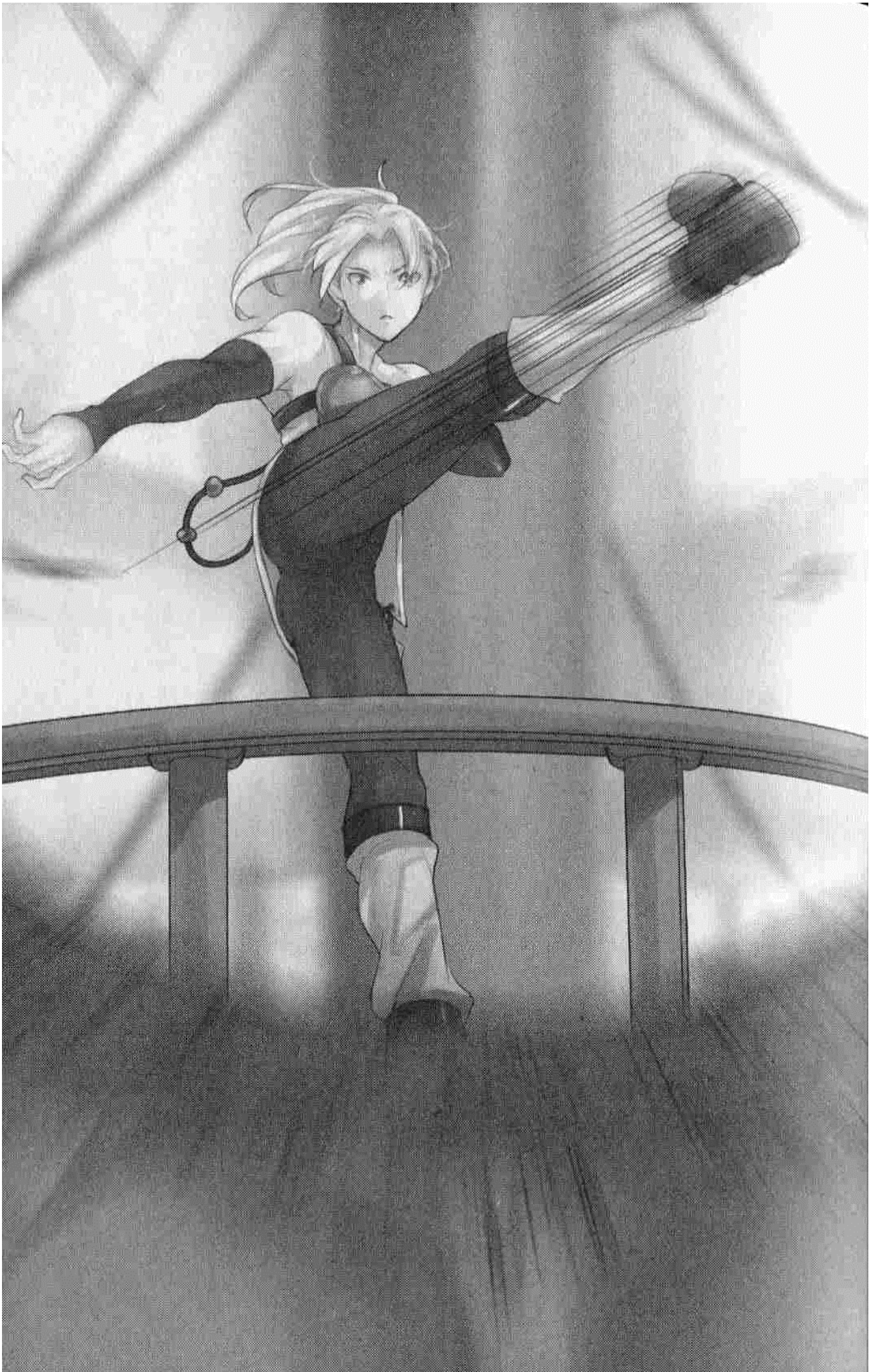
“That’s our Victoria-sama!”

“No wonder she’s inherited the name of the Sorceress Skathi!”

Stomping on the deck with their feet, the sailors cheered, whereupon the female soldier turned around, smiled a bit and waved her hand briefly, then she jumped down agile from the poop deck.

“Well done, Skathi. An impressive feat.”

“You honour me, Milady.”



As Princess Freya approached her through the crowd of the sailors, the female soldier lowered her head a bit with these words, now that her job was done.
“Skathi, I told you to call me ‘Captain’ on the ship.”
Since the emergency was over, Princess Freya reprimanded her with a bitter smile and the tall female soldier, realising her mistake all too late, kept her head down.
“Oh, my apologies, Captain.”
“I will not bear that title for much longer, so please let me make the most of it.”
When the princess aka captain said this with a relaxed expression, even some of the gathered crewmembers started to laugh.
Matching with that, the female soldier laughed as well while she nodded.
“I understand, Captain. By the way, what are we going to do with that Sea Dragon? I would say we are allowed to claim it, because we have finished it off.”
Saying so, she looked behind her at the sea, where the corpse of the Sea Dragon floated.
The corpse of a Sea Dragon was a mountain of treasures: Its leather was robust and repelled water, its bones were strong, yet supple and the meat was edible, albeit not very delicious. On top of that, its fat was sold at ridiculous prices, because of its nice fragrance when burned.
However, Princess Freya shook her head without hesitation.
“No, we better not do that. We almost caused troubles for the harbour, and I do not wish to push our luck in the first harbour we dock at.”
“Aye-aye, Captain.”
Although she replied dutiful like that, the female soldier regretfully glanced at the remains of the Sea Dragon.
Princess Freya knew the meaning behind that glance, so she

smiled wryly with a hand over her mouth.
“Do not be so worried about it. I will talk to them, so that they will definitely return your spear.”
“Yes, thank you so much!”
The female soldier expressed her gratitude to her master with a red face.

Chapter 01: The Prince Consort Is Working Away From Home

By the time a Small Flying Dragon reported the emergency from Port Valentia, Queen Aura was in her office in the Royal Palace and led an endless discussion about a vexing problem with her trusted Secretary Fabio.

“Hmm…”

“Your Highness, the numbers on the documents will not change, no matter how hard you glare at them.”

Sitting on a chair weaved from vines, the Queen slovenly leaned onto the wooden table with her elbows while the middle-aged secretary spoke to her in a flat voice.

“I know that.”

The sharp tone in the answer of the Queen was understandable. The documents at her hands were an estimate of costs for the coming “reinforcements for the Pack Dragon subjugation”, but the numbers written on there were exceeding her expectation by far.

It certainly was not so bad that she got the biggest number wrong, but the second biggest number differed insomuch that it could no longer be sugar-coated.

On a related note, the documents were put together by the civil servants of the Royal Palace, so the numbers were written in “Arabic numerals”.

At the present time, only the immediate subordinate of Aura knew them, but anyone that was familiar with them could testify the value of the Arabic numerals. Once you were used to them, you grasped the numeric value right away.

However, that simplification was a bit of a flop right now. Numbers that she did not want to see were practically jumping out at her.

“The provisions for the soldiers aside, I thought that at least the prices for the military goods were still lower, because of an surplus from the previous war.”
“It seems the supplies were already wrung dry. The merchants are always reacting faster than we think.”
The Queen and Secretary were rather complaining than discussing when they assessed the cruel state of things.
At that very moment, the door was knocked with a dead sound and the voice of a young soldiers sounded from beyond it.
“Excuse me. We have received an urgent Small Flying Dragon message from Port Valentia.”
An urgent message from a faraway seaport city.
“?”
“…”
That did not ring a bell with Aura, so she just cast a questioning glance at her secretary standing next to her, to which Fabio wordlessly shook his head, too.
Since her capable secretary with his authentic skills knew nothing of it, it really must be an unexpected urgent message.
She did not have a good feeling about it, but in her position as the Queen, she was more or less used to such “unexpected happenings”.
“Enter.”
When Aura answered, her face showed not the slightest hint of surprise or worry.

* * *

Approximately one hour later.
Queen Aura was holding an unofficial emergency meeting in the small conference room of the Royal Palace.
The four attendees were Queen Aura, Secretary Fabio, Royal Archmage Espaldion and Zenjirou.
Whenever something serious happened, Aura often consulted

with her two trusted retainers Fabio and Espaldion, but strictly speaking it was impossible that Zenjirou joined them.
Except for official events that had to be attended by royalty, the only time Zenjirou came to the Royal Palace was to “work on behalf of Aura”.
Due to that, it was quite rare that they were gathered in the same place in the Royal Palace.
The urgency of the matter already became more than clear when such a rare occasion happened.
A meeting attended by the Queen was usually quite excessive, but this time it was just a private meeting with her trusted retainers.
Aura tossed the little dragonskin parchment delivered by the Small Flying Dragon onto the table, then started to address the matter without ceremony.
“A Small Flying Dragon arrived from Valentia a short while ago. The information cannot be verified yet, because no other Small Flying Dragon has arrived, but considering the content of it, I dared to call all of you here ahead of schedule.”
Normally the exchange of communication through Small Flying Dragons was conducted by sending multiple Small Flying Dragons with the same message in order to increase its reliability. Usually, the receiver also did not regard the information as legit unless three to four Small Flying Dragons arrived from the same direction in order to dismiss the probability of getting misinformation fabricated by the enemy.
The fact that Aura broke that convention and shared the information, even if only unofficially, indicated that the content of the letter was quite urgent.
Aura read in the tense expression of her trusted retainers that her intention had been understood and she continued to speak clearly with an unusual low voice for a woman.
“Two days ago, a giant ship with ‘four masts’ anchored in Port

Valentia. The ship belongs to the 'Uppsala Kingdom'. The captain is a girl in her teens called Freya Uppsala. She claimed to be the crown princess of the Uppsala Kingdom.
The governor of Valentia decided that the matter was beyond his capabilities and asked for instructions. If possible, he would like us to send someone over."
The middle-aged secretary twisted the mouth and the aged magician widened his small eyes in surprise when she mention the giant ship with "four masts".
Only Zenjirou just looked blankly, showing no signs of surprise. That was no proof of his nerves, though, but rather his ignorance.
"A ship with four masts is a state-of-the-art ship. Even the North Continent only has a handful of them. If the information is really true, we cannot afford to brush aside the claim of the girl to be a princess."
Knowing the score, Secretary Fabio went out of his way to explain the circumstances in detail in addition to his answer to the Queen.
Aura seemed to know what her secretary was getting at, so she nodded once, too.
"Yes. The four-masters all belong to major powers on the North Continent without exceptions. Even a three-master can only be obtained in the private sector by a very wealthy merchant. Considering that, it is actually inevitable that the captain of that ship is royalty. Though I do not know why it has to be a young princess."
She expressed her consent along with an explanation. Then she looked at the aged magician and asked a fundamental question that had bothered her the most.
"Still, I have never heard of that 'Uppsala Kingdom'. What about you, Espaldion? Do you know anything?"
At that, Zenjirou and Secretary Fabio paid attention to the

addressed mage as well.
The prevailing opinion was that a good magician was also a wise man, but that was not always the case.
Even amongst the third-rate magicians without inherited magical power or talent for magic, were wise men with a profound knowledge. The same was true for the opposite: Some of the great mages that could use magic freely, had spent their whole life researching magic, so they were surprisingly ignorant about other things.
Fortunately enough, Espaldion took after the general image: He was an extremely good magician and an extremely wise man.
The aged mage wrinkled his forehead so heavily that his long eyebrows quivered, and pondered before slowly opening his mouth.
“Let me think… I am deeply ashamed to admit that I am not as knowledgeable as you believe me to, Your Highness. Still, if I remember correctly, the Uppsala Kingdom is a country located in the far north of the North Continent.”
Only vaguely remembering the rough location of the kingdom, the elder magician kept his head down shamefaced.
However, it was already worth of praise that he knew at least something about the Uppsala Kingdom.
Considering how vast and informative this world was, his memory was more than reasonable.
To allege an example: It was the same as asking an Japanese about a country in southeast Asia or the Middle East, before the arrival of the black ships in Japan. Having heard of its name and knowing its relative location already counted as “broad knowledge” back then.
“Far in the north of the North Continent? Hmm, then it is no wonder that I never heard of it. But that leaves the question why they would come here all the way from the north.”
Aura posed such a question, but no one could answer her.

The North Continent and South Continent were not doing much of intercontinental trading. Moreover, the little bit they were doing was conducted by countries in the north of the South Continent and the countries in the south of the North Continent, of course.
The Carpa Kingdom was located more or less on the central axis of the South Continent, so they rarely traded with the North Continent directly. Their “intercontinental trading” was done through an intermediate, namely an international port in a country north of the Carpa Kingdom.
Even the southern countries of the North Continent that were trading with them like that, hardly ever came all the way to the Carpa Kingdom, yet a country further in the north had specifically sent a ship with four masts here.
“Our country could really need some direct trade relationships with the North Continent. We cannot let this chance slip away, but they surely have an agenda on their own. I imagine it will be a stiff piece of work to negotiate with them in our interest.”
The Queen nodded to the words of the middle-aged secretary, then replied.
“Certainly. We need to confirm their backgrounds first. It cannot be ruled out that she lied about her royal status. Still, it would be inexcusable when we did not treat her accordingly to her claim and it turns out she was telling the truth. Treating her with fair respect without taking everything she says at face value will definitely be a tough task.”
“Your Highness, I would like to add that Royalty on the North Continent do not necessarily have a ‘Bloodline Magic’. If anything, I have heard there are some royal families that never had one to begin with.”
“Oh, is that so. …”
The pointer from Espaldion made Aura obviously knit her brows.

They only had sparse contact to the North Continent through trading, so they knew next to nothing about their cultural customs. For example, it was equivalent to a feudal lord of the Sengoku Era knowing which country of his European trade partners was Catholic or Protestant.
The fact that Royalty on the North Continent could hardly ever use a “Bloodline Magic” was actually disillusioning for Aura. On the South Continent, the fastest way to prove your royal status was to display your “Bloodline Magic”. If that method was not applicable, it would take quite an effort to simply confirm the royal origin.
“In that case, we need a really competent negotiator all the more. The question is, who will be up to that important task? Do you have anyone in mind, Your Highness?”
On a rare occasion, Secretary Fabio was asking seriously without sarcasm, whereupon Aura nodded briefly.
“Yes, if you have no objections, I am considering to appoint ‘Raffaello Márquez’ for the task.”
All three present men gave a jerk to the name that left the lips of the Queen.
“Sir Raffaello, you say? His abilities make him more than suited for the task, for sure, but he is still the son of Marquis Márquez, you know?”
Secretary Fabio was only stating the obvious, but the meaning behind his words was quite weighty.
Two points would make his appointment problematic: The fact that the Márquez Family was feudal nobility with their own piece of land, and the fact that Valentia was under the direct control of royalty.
As a rule, the appointment as a governor, an extended arm of the ruler so to speak, for an area under the direct control of royalty was given to nobility of the robe that had no piece of land on their own, meaning only top government officials that

directly influenced the politics such as Palace Ministers or Generals of the Royal Army.
Of course that was not legally fixed, and even if it were, the decision of the monarch could overrule the law, so it was possible to enforce her choice, but the Nobility of the Robe was sure to react sharply then.
Needless to say, Aura had already considered that.
Still sitting orderly in her chair, the Queen crossed her arms beneath her breasts.
“I know that. I am not going to appoint him as my ‘delegate’, but as an exceptional ‘assistant delegate’. The actual ‘delegate’ will officially be appointed at his own expenses. That way, I can avoid getting pressured by the nobility of the robe. Needless to say, Raffaelo will actually be doing most of the work.”
She confidentially explained her plan.
“I see. But even if it is in name only, the ’delegate’ should have enough ’impact’ to keep Sir Raffaelo in check, should he not?”
Although he did phrase it as a question, Secretary Fabio had already discerned Aura’s intention. He glanced at Zenjirou, who had been silent the whole time.
Zenjirou may not be the sharpest knife in the drawer, but even he could picture where this was going after so much had been said.
(Oh, I see. I was wondering why I was called in for an unofficial meeting in the palace, but that’s how they’re going to play it, eh.)
Aura wanted to appoint Raffaelo Márquez as “assistant delegate”, but that was not an official position. That provided the advantage that he would not be tied to any laws and could reign freely, but at the same time his standing would be quite poor.
In short, it was something like a private secretary. That definitely was not the kind of position the eldest son of Marquis

Márquez would take, even if temporarily.
Still, even the standing of a private secretary could raise greatly depending on whom he served.
There was only one acceptable entity for whom the eldest son of the Márquez Family, a prominent nobility in the Carpa Kingdom, would work as a private secretary: “Royalty”.
And at the present time, the only grown-up royalty in the Carpa Kingdom besides Queen Aura was Zenjirou.
Zenjirou had accurately picked up on the course of events, but he remained silent for that very reason.
As the Prince Consort, he better kept a “low profile regarding work”, even if only the trusted retainers of Aura were present right now.
The aged magician seemed quite good-natured, but the middle-aged man with the slender face was glancing at him conspicuously for some time now, eager to spot a careless behaviour from him.
Whether she knew about the inner conflict of her husband or not, the Queen directly looked at Zenjirou for the first time today and slowly began to speak.
“Yes. Raffaelo Márquez will only work as a ‘assistant delegate’ under someone with a higher status. At the present time that is just us ‘Royalty’.
At the extreme, I could personally seize the mantle, but it would be quite frightening to be cut off from any information in the palace, even if I can return with my ‘Teleport’ magic on the same day.”
Even as a practitioner of the ‘Teleport’ magic, Aura would not receive any information from the Royal Palace while she was working in a detached territory.
Although they were not at war right now, the Carpa Kingdom had only just now moved on from a great war, so it was about as likely as not that some unforeseen case of need struck.

In the first place, there would be no need to appoint an "assistant delegate" when Aura went to Valentia herself, since she had sufficient skills in politics and negotiations.
Any way you looked at it, all signs pointed at Zenjirou for this role.
Normally, Aura never went about such a roundabout way, neither at an unofficial meeting with her trusted retainers, nor at the discussions with Zenjirou in the Inner Palace. But at an unofficial meeting with both sides combined, she had to stick to the procedure of "advancing the topic logically while convincing everyone with a detailed explanation" to some extent.
The Queen declared her conclusion without taking her eyes off her husband.
"As such, no one else but you remains, Zenjirou."
Called upon, Zenjirou did not flinch, because he has had enough time to prepare himself for it.
"Me, you say? Well, if that is your command, I will not oppose it, of course, Your Highness."
He smoothly voiced the answer he had prepared in his head, whereupon the Queen frowned a bit affected.
"Hmm? Do you have any qualms about it? Then do tell."
As expected of a harmonious married couple, the two of them were smoothly carrying on a conversation as if reading from a script, even though they had agreed upon nothing beforehand.
"Okay. I am currently carrying out the task of dealing with Prince Francesco and Princess Bona from the Twin Kingdom. I was wondering what would happen to them then."
"You are right. We cannot turn our back on the obligations towards them as the host. I would undertake that task then. It may be impossible to meet with them as frequently as you have, but we can only ask their understanding for it."
"Very well. I, too, will meet with them once before my

departure and apologize for the inconveniences in person."
"Yes, please do so."
Completely different from their usual talks in the Inner Palace, they were obviously conversing as superior and subordinate right now.
Still, it was nothing out of the ordinary that the same two people talked different to each other depending whether they were at work or in private. Zenjirou was not unaccustomed to this either.
He had already envisioned an agreement, but still mentioned all of his worries just in case.
"But do you not think that the nobility of the robe will oppose my appointment? Is there no one amongst them with suitable skills?"
At the beginning, Zenjirou had taken the view that he was "not interested in any official duties" and had secluded himself in the Inner Palace.
But lately he had been in the Royal Palace a lot, because he was entertaining Prince Francesco and Princess Bona, and when he now went to a detached land on behalf of Aura, people would probably start to get suspicious of him.
His question was born out of that worry, but Aura resolutely shook her head.
"No, you do not need to worry about that. To be honest, there is someone suitable, but he is already working in a position fitting his abilities.
Forgive me for saying this, but your temporary absence will affect the governmental affairs least of all."
Frankly speaking, she was telling him that he was doing the least work here.
He was in this situation by his own choice, but it was still a bit of a shock to hear it from his wife so straightforward.
"I see…"

For a moment, Zenjirou looked hurt. Nevertheless, all concerns had been more or less overcome, if he put his emotions aside. Regaining his spirit in no time, he deeply lowered his head conform to etiquette just like he had learned it while still firmly seated in his chair.
“Very well. I will gladly carry out your command to the best of my humble abilities.”
“Good. I am counting on you.”
The Queen acknowledged the loyalty of her husband with a large-hearted nod.

* * *

“Sorry!”
At evening of the same day. The first thing Aura told Zenjirou when she came back to the Inner Palace was an apology.
Her point-black apology came out of nowhere, but Zenjirou did know what she was apologizing for.
“Mm, it’s fine. You had no choice but to make that call, right? Still, I hope you can explain it.”
He replied with a smile like always, then said down on the couch.
Following a sudden summoning to the Royal Palace, he was told to go work away from home in a detached royal property by necessity.
Of course he was not doubting the sincerity of his wife towards him, but this matter definitely needed further explanation.
No matter how much you trusted someone, it was not a pleasant feeling to be ordered around one-sidedly.
“Yes, of course I will do so.”
Saying that, Aura sat down on the couch across from her husband.
Compared to her usual relaxed sitting position, she had now folded her hands on her knees instead. The words “regretful”

and “pious” would fit her posture best.
It also gave the impression that she was somewhat hanging her head.
In Zenjirou’s opinion, the matter did not really call for standing on ceremony to such an extent, but decided to keep that to himself and voice a question instead.
“Then let me be frank: Who really was your first choice for the assignment in Valentia? Raffaelo Márquez or me?”
That had not been an impromptu question. He had come up with it when he ruminated on the matter by himself after the meeting.
As she had not expected him to bring that up himself, Aura widened her eyes a bit surprised, then answered truthfully.
“You.”
“I knew it.”
In light of her reply, Zenjirou looked convinced and sighed once.
“I thought about it and found it strange. If she claimed to be royalty from the North Continent, then we normally would invite her to the capital and give her a great welcome, right? Despite that, you talk about being short-handed and still want to send a certain capable someone with so much status that he was your former marriage candidate, and me, the only other grown-up royalty, there at the same time.”
Even though the situation could be handled easier, she went to almost unreasonable lengths to send valuable human resources away. Even Zenjirou could guess that something was lying behind it.
“Indeed. Actually, when I received the news, I initially thought that I have to go to Valentia myself to take control.”
“Wait a moment, Your Majesty!! Think of your position!”
The unexpected remark of his wife lead Zenjirou into making an unwitting retort.

In turn, Aura seemed to have anticipated his reaction, as she just nodded unfazed.
“Of course reality is different. As such, my second idea was to send you.”
Her way of speaking had regained a bit of her usual tone.
“Well, at least I get now that you’re attaching quite the importance to this matter. So, why couldn’t we bring the self-proclaimed princess into the palace?”
“Yes, before I explain that, I want to check your background knowledge.
Zenjirou, do you know who is in control of Valentia?”
In accord with her slightly strange question, he recalled the summary of the country he had learned from Lady Octavia while answering.
“Ehm.. The ‘Duke of Valentia’, if I remember correctly. Right now, that’s you?”
When her husband replied exemplary, the Queen nodded pleased.
“Indeed. Everyone tends to believe that all the pieces of land that are usually called ’Royal Domains’ are under the direct control of Royalty, but as a matter of fact, only the capital and a few small resorts are established as property of the crown. All the other ‘Royal Domains’ have a title of nobility on their own, which is just succeeded by royalty. The fundamental difference to a common feudal lord title is that the appointment of a successor is not done by the titular himself, but instead by the current ruler.”
In other words: The title of a common domain was bequeathed from the parent to the child, from the child to the grandchild and so on. On the other hand, the title of a royal domain was granted by the monarch, which meant that the monarch could appoint a close relative as its next lord.
Needless to say, it did not have to be a close relative, appointing

oneself was allowed, too. Due to that, it kind of became a rule that the monarch himself succeeded the titles of important domains such as Valentia.
Zenjirou was already aware of these circumstances, but was not able to relate how that fact prevented them from inviting the "self-proclaimed princess" to the capital.
Since he tilted his head puzzled, Aura explained it carefully.
"What is important in this case is that the Capital represents the country itself, whereas 'Valentia' is simply a domain under my direct control.
The domains are quite self-governing. To the point that the kingdom cannot meddle with them as long as they fulfil their obligation to the country, namely paying taxes."
That self-government was a real nuisance to royalty, so Aura was making various plans to restrict the authority of the domains, but right now, the self-government played into her hands instead.
"Oh, you mean, it will fall within the country's remit when the 'self-proclaimed princess' comes to the capital, but if she stays in Valentia, it will fall within your remit?"
When her husband clapped his fist on his palm and checked with her, Aura assented it with a nod.
"Yes. For a normal domain it would be treachery to build a friendship with a foreign country without the country's permission, no matter how much self-governing they are, but we royalty are excluded from that.
If I manage to befriend the 'self-proclaimed princess' as the 'Duchess of Valentia', I can ultimately establish close ties with her without much interference from within our country."
"I see now."
Zenjirou was finally convinced to some extent.
It was generally not really laudable when the monarch prioritized his own benefit over the one of the country, but at

times it was inevitable.
A feudal state was mainly achieved by a power balance between the feudal lords and royalty. When you only focussed on strengthening the country, but weakened the influence of royalty in turn, it could call forth a rebellion.
A monarch needed to flourish the country, but at the same time grant the royal family enough power to suppress the enriched nobility.
“Okay, I get now why you want to deal with them in Valentia. Does that mean you’ve a beneficial deal in view?”
“Yes. And not just in view, it is almost certain.
Like we talked about this noon, a ship from the North Continent rarely ever comes directly to our country. Their arrival hence means that they pursue a large goal in our country or have been in an unlucky accident.”
“Mh? What are the odds for it being a whim? Maybe they didn’t come especially for Valentia, but rather dropped by after their trip to a harbour in the north of the South Continent.”
Aura denied his simple-minded question by shaking her head.
“No. We might not be allies with the countries in our north, but we keep at least a friendly relationship of neutrality.
If they came to Valentia after a stop in a northern country, we would have been informed of their arrival by the northern country.”
“I see.”
When Zenjirou showed his understanding, Aura continued.
“If they deliberately came here, there is plenty of room for negotiations. And if they have drifted here due to some accident, we have already won.
After all, they definitely need repairs at the dock when their ship has met with an accident. Even if it is a large ship with four masts, I doubt that they have so many shipwrights on board to do the repairs by themselves.

In that case, they inevitably need people from our country to repair their ship. And that will be a once-in-a-lifetime chance to study the state-of-the-art ship of the North Continent."
Befitting for a Queen of a major power, Aura then showed a confident smile and licked her lips.
"In short, you're primarily after the blueprints of their large ship?"
"Yes. The North Continent has other advanced technologies such as a big furnace that melts iron in large quantities, but I want the ship first. Once we have a large ship, we can directly trade with the North Continent ourselves in the future."
Although the fire of royal ambition was flickering in the eyes of his wife, Zenjirou inclined his head and took the wind out of her sails.
"Hmm~ But will it be that easy? I'm no expert, either, but I think you need the necessary skills first to reproduce a monster like that large ship."
The advance in technology was not so half-hearted that you could copy a new technology right away, even if you had access to the finished product.
For example: An intelligent person was able to understand the construction of a carriage by analysing it. However, he would not be able to build the carriage from scratch so easily, even if he understood its build-up.
A skill to make equally sized wheels on both sides. A skill to make a straight and round axletree. A skill to make axle holders that kept the axletree in place but also let it rotate without restraint. Along with various other skills, one built a carriage. And the same applied to a ship.
"Yes, you do have a point. But we have master shipwrights on our own and I would like to believe that the technology is not so advanced that it will be impossible to analyse and imitate it."
After a moment of pondering, Aura replied with that.

“Okay. All right, then. But once I go over there, we won’t get in touch so easily anymore. So I want to write down a list about stuff like an order of priority or negotiating range. May I?”
“Sure. Normally it would be inconceivable to commit such classified information on paper, but in your case, no one in this world can read your writing anyway, so it should be no problem.”
“Thanks. I’ll write the numbers with Kanji instead of Arabic numerals, too, just in case.”
It should technically be next to impossible that a third party or even the negotiating partner caught a glimpse of the memo, but better safe than sorry. There existed a tiny chance that the Arabic numerals could be read, because they were gradually gaining currency, starting with the civil servants in the Royal Palace, but anything else would be written in Japanese and obviously enough, no one in this world could read that.

“…What do I favour in this case?”
“Of course the ship‘s…”
After that Zenjirou and Aura huddled together and had a long discussion, which resulted in a list of ten copy papers that outlined an order of priority about what Aura wanted from the “self-proclaimed princess”, and the allowed negotiation range for Zenjirou.
Needless to say, the actual negotiations would gravely differ from these predictions, but it surprisingly made all the difference whether you prepared like that or not.
Especially to Zenjirou, who was bad at ad-libbing and quick to get worried. Ever since his days as a salaryman, he had spent a lot of time for these kind of preparations.
“Okay, that’s all I could think of for now.”
Putting his ball pen onto the table, Zenjirou stretched oneself luxuriously while still sitting down.

Aura unwittingly cracked a smile when her husband rejoiced from having finished one task, but she suddenly remembered that she had something to tell him, so she checked herself once again.
“Zenjirou.”
“Mh? What?”
“Forgive me. In the end, I caused you trouble for the sake of the country again.”
Saying so, she lowered her head a bit to him.
This was technically nothing new, but Aura still felt the need to apologize.
In the original promise with Zenjirou, she had said that she would meet his desires as much as possible as long as it did not conflict with the country, so it would not be quite right to say that she broke the promise per se, but she certainly felt bad about pinning politics on him every time.
“Ah, yeah.”
Just as Zenjirou was about to continue with comforting words such as “It was inevitable” and “It’s not your fault” like always, he suddenly thought of something.
(Huh? Now that I think about it, I always shrug it off as inevitable, but isn’t my situation getting worse and worse?)
Of course it was not so bad yet that he would mention it aloud.
Although he was now more often in the Royal Palace during the day for some duties, he always had the time to go back to the Inner Palace for dinner and on one of five days, he could laze around in the Inner Palace.
And above all, this world did not have the concept of “working late hours”, because there was no light at night. Business hours ended as soon as the sun set, albeit with some exceptions, so from his point of view, the hours of work were not all that great.
But because of that, he could have some quality time with his

beloved wife in the wired Inner Palace after the end of work. When he worked away from home in Valentia, though, he would obviously be separated from the electrical appliances, his wife Aura and his son Carlos Zenkichi.
For a short period of time, it definitely was not something infeasible, but if he were to utter the word “inevitable” now, he sensed that it would affect his future.
As far as possible, Zenjirou replied with harmless words and a soft expression.
“Hmm, I know your position puts you in bind, but it seems to be especially bad this time. Before I noticed it, it had progressed so far that I could no longer refuse. I was really surprised.”
The Queen was taken by surprise when her husband did not reply with the usual “it was inevitable, don’t worry about it”. And in the next moment, she realized her own line of thinking and turned red from shame.
(I am the worst. Even though I apologized, I had already assumed that he would forgive me unconditionally.)
If her husband had been someone else than Zenjirou, Aura would have taken the easy way out and brought the “self-proclaimed princess” into the Capital to deal with her.
But in reality, she had made the prompt decision to solve the matter in Valentia and reap all the benefits for the royal family as soon as she had read the letter from the Small Flying Dragon. Even though she did not believe that the decision itself had been wrong, it did mean that she had unconsciously regarded Zenjirou as “a pawn that obeyed her unconditionally”.
(Otherwise I would not be so shaken right now.)
Aura reflected on herself self-aware at heart, then straightened out her expression and faced her husband anew.
“Yes, I am truly sorry. You have all the right to blame me. In the end, everything seems to work out just fine, but that was only possible because you said nothing and went along with my

plan. I thank you for that.
I could say now that I will never let something like this happen again, but that will be impossible, so I will at least discuss things with you first from now wherever possible.
And once you have completed the job, I want to reward you with something material for sure this time. You do not have to choose right now, but could you give it some thought?"
"Ah, well, okay."
Zenjirou answered her somewhat vaguely, but approvingly.
One of the reasons why Aura was so quick to rely on him was definitely the fact that he would not accept a reward.
Only starting to realize that now, he pondered for a moment.
"Something I want, eh…Hmm."
Still, no matter how often you asked him about this, he really could not think of anything. To begin with, he had never been the greedy type. The best proof for that was the fact that he had saved up three million yen during his years as an subordinate salaryman.
On the one hand he had been too busy to spent the money, on the other hand he never cooked by himself because he was too busy. Most of his meals had been prepackaged dishes or taken at a restaurant. The only bicycle he owned had been second-hand, too. Except these expenses, he spent no money on hobbies, so he was able to save up as much as three million yen.
Not to mention that he usually spent all his time here in the Inner Palace or Royal Palace, so he did not come across any news that would become an object of desire. It did not help, either, that he was not feeling the need for anything in his daily life.
Troubled like that, Zenjirou asked Aura instead.
"Hey, what's customary to receive in such a case anyway?"
Upon his question, the Queen looked up to the ceiling and mused for a bit.

“Hmm, the best bet is money. Lower or mid-level nobility often get paid directly in gold and silver coins, but upper nobility or royalty often receive something that earns them a regular income such as a title of nobility accompanied by a domain or an estate.”
Then she answered smoothly like that.
The reaction from Zenjirou on the other hand was anything but enthusiastic.
“Hmm, money, eh. To be honest, I don’t think it’s all that wise to have money at my own disposal in my position.”
Zenjirou was not giving much credit to his own skills, nor to his own personality. He honestly had no confidence that he could resist the temptation to cover up an incident with money, if he were to make some kind of mistake in the future.
The reward came with such a risk and he was not really keen on it, to begin with. Or at least, it was not something he would immediately jump at for now.
Zenjirou temporarily put the decision on hold and asked another question.
“Anything else?”
“Well, some material goods. Normally it is something related to the achievement. A soldier gets a good spear or lance for military exploits and a civil servant usually gets a dragon bone brush with a detailed pattern or a beautifully polished calculation stone.”
The dragon bone brush was, like its name implied, a brush made out of the bones of a dragon. It was a kind of dip pen and the ink was sponged up into slits that were carved into the bone. The design was similar to the glass pens in Japan.
On the other hand, the calculation stone was, again like its name implied, a primitive calculation device. On both surfaces of a flat stone like the ones used for the game go, rills were engraved in a cross pattern. Depending on how you put down

the stone, you could display the numbers from one to ten.
An educated person of this world could apply the four basic arithmetic operations by using numerous of these calculation stones, but Zenjirou did not know how exactly.
He had used them once during a lesson with Lady Octavia, but could not really memorize their usage.
“A brush or stone, huh. Hmm, not really my thing.”
Of course he was not thrilled. In terms of usability, the dragon bone brush was no match for the ball pen, and the calculation stone was not even a patch on the hand calculator or the calculation software on the computer.
These presents had undoubtedly a great value as perfect pieces of art, too, but Zenjirou was neither a collector, nor an art enthusiast, so they merely left a “oh, cool” impression on him.
A decision was put on hold here as well. Still, he would not really be troubled by receiving a reward, nor would it affect his surroundings by accepting one, so he might as well compromise on this matter.
Just in case, he asked yet another question, though.
“Something else?”
“The permission to marry, I guess.
The marriages of higher nobles usually requires the blessing of the ruler. In most cases, it is nothing but a formality, but it did happen before that the ruler opposed a marriage between two high-ranking families or between families with a too great difference in status.
In such cases, you can overrule the gap in class or inconveniences to the royal family, through military or civil exploits.”
“That got nothing to do with me, though.”
When her husband immediately interjected to remind her, Aura unwittingly showed a wry smile.
“Well, for now, yes. Another choice would be to simply award a

‘woman’ as a reward.
And by that I do not mean a woman that will be your wife, but rather someone, who brings her beauty to market, like a dancer or singer.”
She indifferently mentioned that in a composed tone, whereupon Zenjirou heaved a sigh with a somewhat disgusted expression.
“Nope.”
That short utterance completely revealed his mentality.
Obviously enough, Zenjirou, too, was a healthy young man in body and soul, so he was sometimes driven by the urge to have a woman besides his wife.
But if anything, that was merely a “fantasy about having an affair”, and did not mean that he wanted to bring another woman into his home, the Inner Palace.
The Queen smiled wryly when her husband was as obstinate as ever about this topic.
“Okay. That is about all the common rewards I can think of. So, did it help you out?”
While scratching his head with his right hand, Zenjirou replied to her question with a sulky face.
“Hmm, well, yeah, I guess? If I don’t come up with something else, I’ll probably take a dragon bone brush or a calculation stone.”
His answer made Aura widen her eyes a bit in surprise.
“Oho? Did that pique your interest?”
She did not expect his next answer, though.
He shook his head
“No. Instead of an interest, it’s more of a harmless choice from all of them.”
and responded without mincing matters.
As such, Aura unwittingly heaved a sigh.
“You cannot really call it a reward then, though…”

Apparently her unpretentious husband was duteously trying to fulfil the “obligation” of accepting a material reward. Moreover, he was being extremely careful that it influenced his standing as little as possible.
Aura massaged her temples with the thumb and middle finger of her right hand in order to suppress a headache, then delivered an admonition.
“Zenjirou, there is no need to take others into consideration when accepting a reward. I will properly refuse you if you should ever wish for something that goes against the country. You just have to be honest to your desire, okay?
Is there nothing you want? You supported yourself back then in your former world, correct? What did you buy there? You were not so poor that you had your hands full already with basic necessities, were you?”
This time, Zenjirou looked up to the ceiling and mused.
“Hmm, back in Japan? I wasn’t short on money for sure, but short on time, I guess. I could never spare the time to get something I wanted.
Ah, but now that I think about it, there were a couple of things I wanted back then.”
Speaking of things that he wanted during his time as a student and working adult, respectively, there did come a few things to his mind.
For example, a wristwatch.
He had been in the possession of two wristwatches, a digital one for private use and an analogue one matching his suit, but both of them had been cheap exemplars that did not even cost a thousand yen.
One day, he really had wanted to own a wristwatch from a higher price level.
Other than that, he had considered a new car.
Half a year after joining the company, Zenjirou had bought a

second-hand hybrid car, but that had simply been a compromise. The car he had “wanted” and perceived as “cool” had been a different one. Instead he had compromised on the hybrid car for its overwhelmingly better gas consumption and second-hand price.
Because he always went to work on the train (his company did not have a parking lot) and did his shopping with his bike (his leased parking lot was farther away than the convenience store or supermarket), he practically never needed his car, but did not get rid of it despite that, which disclosed his abnormal fixation on it.
The only other thing he could think of was a season ticket for the junior league team, whose fan club he had belonged to. Money-wise, that had not been out of reach for him, but he did not buy it because his days had been filled with overtime work and he did not have the time to go into a football stadium.
Anyway, Zenjirou had racked his brain, but still could not come up with anything helpful.
“Hmm, I can’t think of anything. I did wanted a few things back in my old life, but these are no longer desirable here. To be honest, I haven’t come across anything in this world that piqued my interest.”
Saying so, he raised his two palms towards the ceiling as if surrendering, and shrugged his shoulders in an exaggerated manner.
Aura knew very well that he really meant what he was saying, hence she was troubled.
“Hmm… Is there really nothing? You can put aside whether it is actually feasible or not for now. Just name something for the sake of it.”
“That’s all very well, but I’m really not inconvenienced. I may be a bit busy with work, but I also got plenty of free time. And I’ve got enough DVDs and games to not get bored. If I had to

name something, it would be the internet, but that's clearly out of the question."
He previously had discussed with Aura if it was possible to connect to the internet, even if only for a short time, by combining the "Time Reversal" and "World Bridge" magic, but that had turned out to be impossible.
"Time Reversal" was to be cast on objects, not on airspace, and "World Bridge" only deployed its effect for an instant, so his idea of "winding back time of a designed airspace to a date, where the right star constellation allowed the casting of World Bridge, and then connecting with a public hotspot for the internet by evoking World Bridge" was impracticable.
In actual fact, Zenjirou had not been convinced by her explanation. On an intuitive level, he somehow got the feeling that it was possible nevertheless.
But even if that was the case, he would need to know more about "Space-Time Magic" first, and considering that he currently could only use the first magic of it, he still had a long way to go.
"….."
"….."
Both of them no longer knew what to say next. This happened every time. Whenever this topic came up, they were both at a loss for words at the end for sure.
However, Zenjirou forced himself to say something in order to break this silence.
"Well, you know, I'll be away from the Royal Palace, or rather from the Capital for the first time now, so I might find something interesting over there."
"Indeed. It might breath new life into your lifestyle on that note. Valentia is a great place. The sun may be strong there, but the sea breeze makes it chillier than in the Capital. The seafood is quite delicious, too.

Though no matter how much you will like it, I will not cede the title of 'Duke of Valentia' to you."
Her joke caused Zenjirou to laugh, too.
"Ahaha. No worries, I'm not that unreasonable."
"Also, do you not dare to bring the 'self-proclaimed princess' back home with you. It will be troublesome regardless of whether her claim is true or not."
"You're such a worrywart."
Before long, the royal couple was laughing frolicsome together.

* * *

A few days later.
Zenjirou was having a pleasant conversation with Prince Francesco and Princess Bona in a room of the Royal Palace.
Like always, the sunlight brightened up the room and they were sitting on couches across each other while enjoying some tea and dried fruits to their talking.
The only difference was the topic of their conversation: It announced a temporary separation.
"Oh, rumour has it that you were going to leave the capital. So it's true then, Your Majesty Zenjirou."
After Zenjirou had told him about his departure to Valentia himself, the blonde prince neatly put his teacup back onto the table and said this.
"To be honest, I am surprised about the suddenness. But I pray for your safe return."
The princess with the auburn hair, on the other hand, could not conceal her restlessness and was unconsciously fidgeting with her hands resting on her lap.
Although Prince Francesco had been surprised, he was not concerned, whereas Princess Bona looked just as concerned as she was surprised.
Their different reactions could be related to their distinct

mental toughness, of course, but the more important factor was their differential positions.
For Prince Francesco, Zenjirou's absence only meant the loss of a "playfellow he got along with". In Princess Bona's case, though, it truly was a matter of life and death, because she lost the person, who "sympathized and cooperated with her the most" in regards to her chaperone duty towards Prince Francesco.
The usual behaviour of the prince, whether it was staged or not, was causing trouble without doubt.
And the one to be directly affected by that was Princess Bona.
Consequently, the one to help her out the most had been Zenjirou.
Knowing this, it was understandable why Princess Bona felt like crying.
Zenjirou felt hesitation dwell up within him for a moment upon receiving the pleading look of the young princess, but he was not so thoughtless as to act on that emotion.
"Thank you very much. I will be going there for the first time, so I am a bit nervous."
Continuing to put on a friendly face, he coped with it reasonable. Still, no matter how reasonable he might be, it would be all for nothing, if the other party did not accept it.
"Lucky you! Oh, please keep the souvenirs in mind!"
Prince Francesco, as cool as a cucumber, spoke to the royalty of another country as if a child pestering its father when he left on a trip.
"Prince Francesco!"
That behaviour of his was nothing new, but Princess Bona still turned pale. She must be rather sincere or sensitive.
Having said this, it was probably a good thing to have someone with a constant prudence around, because it was an undeniable fact that the behaviour of the prince lacked courtesy, no matter

how used you were to it.
Her state of mind could by no means be favourable, though, since she had to be attentive around the clock.
“Please relax, Princess Bona. This is just an informal meeting, so there is no need to be so uptight. I understand, Prince Francesco. I will get you something suitable.
Hmm, Valentia is a seaport city after all. It may not be much of a business, but perhaps they are selling beautiful pearls or good-looking corals. If I can get my hands on them, I will bring it along for you.”
When Zenjirou responded like that, Prince Francesco rejoiced while his face beamed with joy.
“Really!? Please do so! Phew, I’m really looking forward to it!”
Both, corals and pearls, were jewellery relatively unknown to the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell, because it was a landlocked country.
As a first-rate practitioner of the Bestowal Magic as well as a first-rate jewellery craftsman, it was only natural that Prince Francesco would be fascinated with unfamiliar jewellery.
And that applied to the girl with the auburn hair sitting next to him as well, because she dedicated her life to jewellery even more than him.
“Prince Francesco! Even if this is an informal meeting, please refrain from using such a casual manner of speaking!”
While reprimanding the in name only prince of her own country, Princess Bona looked at Zenjirou with her dark brown eyes glittering from desire.
“A- Allow me to extend my sincere gratitude as well, Your Majesty Zenjirou.
Corals are superb materials that can be altered in many ways, and although pearls are not suited as a medium for magic tools, their brilliance and shape make them extremely valuable for decorations.

Prince Francesco would surely produce a masterpiece from them."
From her choice of words, you would think that she was merely completing the appreciation from Prince Francesco, but Zenjirou was not dense insomuch that he would fail to notice how her true motive seeped through her forceful tone and sparkling eyes.
"Yes, I would like to see it once it is completed. That goes for Prince Francesco's work, of course, but for yours as well, Princess Bona."
Hence he explicitly linked the "souvenir" to Princess Bona as well, and not just to Prince Francesco.
"Th- Thank you so much!"
Princess Bona realized what he meant and lowered her head with such vigour that the silver dust sprinkled on her auburn hair scattered around.

* * *

Zenjirou departed to Valentia a few days after that.
The reason for the delay was rather simple: The personnel to prepare for his arrival had to be "leaped" to Valentia before him. Queen Aura did have enough magical power to use "Teleport" numerous times on a single day, but her magical power was considered a trump card for the Carpa Kingdom. They could not risk that she was out of magical power, even if only for a day, in case something happened.
Therefore, she could only sent one person per day to Valentia with her "Teleport" magic.

"Are you ready, Zenjirou? If so, I will 'leap' you now."
In view of her question, Zenjirou put down the backpack he was shouldering and spread out its contents.
"Wait a sec. I'll check one last time. Flashlight… check. Pocket

knife… check. Distilled alcohol as a present…”
His backpack was mainly filled with stuff that he had brought with him from Earth.
General daily necessities like a change of clothes could just be obtained in Valentia and anything that could not be bought such as his official royal attire was already taken along by the personnel that “leaped” before him.
Frankly speaking, Zenjirou could have gone with nothing but the clothes he was wearing.
“…Okay, everything’s there. I didn’t forget anything.”
After he finished his inspection, he closed the backpack and carried it with his hand.
Right now, he was clad in his third official attire.
Although he was currently all alone with Aura in the Inner Palace, the government officials, starting with the governor of Valentia, would be waiting for him at the teleport destination, so he was expected to dress accordingly to his status.
And he definitely should not wear the backpack on his back while dressed like this. It would wrinkle the clothes, which were similar to Japanese clothes, for one, and it would look unbecoming, too.
Speaking of, carrying around a backpack was not all that favourable either, but they would have to tolerate that.
The Queen, wearing a red dress, looked her husband, who stood in front of her with the backpack in one hand, in the eyes again and slowly began to speak.
“Well then, I will send you to Valentia now. Raffaelo Márguez is already there, so approach him for any official matters.
He may lack initiative, but he is very capable in executing orders.”
Raffaelo Márguez.
He had been one of the two marriage candidates for Queen Aura.

Needless to say, Zenjirou was not holding him in high esteem.
“Okay. I’ll just be a figurehead and leave all the detail work to Sir Raffaelo.”
The Queen laughed when her husband contained himself by suppressing the complex feeling of relying on the former husband candidate of his wife, and nodded in return.
“Yes, do that. You are royalty while he is a vassal. Make the most of him.”
“Yeah. To be honest, I have my troubles with that, but I’ll manage somehow.”
Even during his time at the company, Zenjirou never got the chance to have a “subordinate” at his command. Therefore, ordering someone around was uncharted territory for him, but like Aura had said, he was “royalty” now, so he could no longer talk his way out of it by claiming it to have “troubles” with it. Especially because he had to pose as a powerless royalty without ability and motivation. The skill to “leave matters to others” would surely be in demand more often from now on.
“Another familiar face you will see is Ines from the waiting maids in the Inner Palace. Your residence in Valentia will have maids, too, but they will likely not measure up to your standards.
To make matter worse, it is your first time spending the night outside the Inner Palace. For your own good, remain at Ines‘ side as much as possible.”
Next up, Aura advised him cautionary.
His view towards attendants would be regarded as heresy in this world.
It might go without saying for a citizen of Modern Earth, but Zenjirou was not thick-skinned enough, so that he could relax while an attendant stood wordless at attention in the same room.
The only ones, who understood his “sensitivity of propinquity”,

were the waiting maids working in the Inner Palace.
The discomfort would not be unbearable if it only concerned the maids, but he also had to live in an environment without his electrical appliances for the first time.
It was a crumb of comfort that it was not the hottest season right now, but a lifestyle without refrigerator and ventilator, not to mention air conditioning, was surely tougher than he acknowledged.
“Just stick to Ines in any event. You will be fine if you leave all your private requests to her. Otherwise put, she will tell you if something really is out of the question.
Knowing you, this will be an unfounded worry, but please try to refrain from any selfishness.”
Forget about selfishness, Zenjirou never demanded more than what was absolutely necessary. Although Aura knew that it would be rude to bring it up, she had to say it just in case. Something he had taken for granted so far might now turn out to be unattainable during his stay away from the Inner Palace. It was possible then that he would trouble the waiting maids with an “unconscious selfishness” at such a time.
“Okay. I’ll behave as well-mannered as possible.”
Zenjirou sensed that there was more to her advice of “sticking to Ines” than meets the eye, but he just responded affirmative without pursuing that matter further.
This time for sure, he would completely be separated from the culture of Modern Earth and plunged into the “life in a different world”. Zenjirou was positive that she was just that worried about him.
“Do you have your instruction memo? Do not dare to lose it, you hear? Once you have gone over there, we practically can no longer communicate with each other. Not even a Small Flying Dragon will be able to deliver a letter in a day or so.”
The instruction memo was written at the behest of Zenjirou

and listed an order of priority in detail about what Aura wanted from the “self-proclaimed princess” and what he was allowed to promise in return.
Of course it was written in Japanese, so it would not turn into a disaster, even if it fell into the wrong hands.
“Yeah, no worries. I got it here. And I remembered everything just in case.”
Answering like that, Zenjirou patted the backpack, where the instruction memo was.
“…..”
“…..”
At a loss for words, the two of them just gazed at each other wordlessly. They had said everything that needed to be said. All that was left was to use the “Teleport” magic to send him to Valentia. But neither of them mentioned that and they simply remained silent.
From the day Zenjirou had come to this world until today, these two had never lift apart from each other. Even if they knew that Zenjirou would be back as soon as the matter was settled, they could not help but feel sad about the separation.
“…Aura.”
Breaking the silence, Zenjirou wrapped his right hand around the waist of his wife in a red dress, gently pulling her closer.

“Mm…”

Aura discerned what her husband was up to from that alone, so she abandoned herself to his arms and flopped onto his chest.

When their bodies touched, they embraced each other and shared a kiss.

The kiss lasted for some time while they remained in a tight caress with both arms put around each other’s back.

“Mm…”

“Mh, Uhn, Mm…”

Zenjirou suddenly became weepy when he thought about how he would not be able to relish that sensation for a while now.

Unlike their usual casual intimacy, they now were connected in a heartfelt embrace and shared a passionate kiss. Then they slowly let go of each other in a natural way.

“Well, see you soon then.”

Picking up the dropped backpack at his feet, Zenjirou finally said so to Aura with a resolved expression.

Nevertheless, his left hand was still resting on the shoulder of his wife regretfully even now, so he was not entirely resolved to separate yet.

Aura gently removed his left hand from her shoulder with her own right hand without wiping the smile off her face, then held up the palm of her right hand in front of his chest.

“Okay. Here I go.”

After answering like that, she closed her eyes and concentrated her energy. At the same time, her entire body started to emit an overwhelming magical power.

“…..”

Zenjirou unwittingly closed his eyes, too, and waited.

With his eyes closed, he could hear the “chant” of his wife.

“Send my chosen person to the place I envision. As compensation, I make…”

It was neither hot, nor oppressive. A distinct “power” simply enveloped his whole body.

And in the next moment, he felt a bit drowsy, so he shook his head and opened his eyes reflexively.

“We have been awaiting you, Master Zenjirou.”

Instead of Queen Aura,

“Welcome to Valentia, Your Majesty Zenjirou.”

he saw unfamiliar men kneeling down on one knee.

Chapter 02: Princess Freya of the Sea

“Wow. I was really teleported…”

After Zenjirou had briefly greeted the nobility, starting with the prostrating governor of Valentia, he was taken to his private chamber and said this admiring while looking out of the window.

This was the residence for the Duke of Valentia, sort of the centre of the seaport city.

As a matter of common knowledge, the title Duke of Valentia was inherited by royalty from generation to generation, so the residence was actually almost never used and the administration was in the neighbouring residence of the governor, but right now the residence had been whipped into perfect shape to accommodate Zenjirou. One would not believe that it had been desolate a short while ago.

The opened window let in the dazzling sunlight and the salty breeze typical for a seaport city.

Aside from that, his vision was filled with the stony harbour that reminded him of an old city in Europe he had seen on TV before, and the marvellous vast blue sea.

Most of the stones used in the harbour were white, so it beautifully contrasted with the blue of the sea.

“You just have to add the royal red to it, and you get a tricolour. Man, I feel like singing now.”

The colours blue, white and red reminded him of the soccer team he had been a fan of in Japan, so he unconsciously

mumbled to himself while narrowing his eyes to slits to the reflection of the sun on the water surface.

At this point, the door was knocked and the familiar voice of a woman resounded.

“Master Zenjirou, may I have a bit of your time?”

“Ah, yes.”

When he permitted it reflexively, an acquainted woman entered as expected.

“Excuse me, Master Zenjirou.”

The woman was middle-aged and wore carmine red maid clothes.

Her name was Ines and she was the Head of the Cleaning Department in the Inner Palace.

Amongst the older waiting maids in the Inner Palace, she was exceptional slender and graceful.

Like her position suggested, she was in charge of the cleaning in the Inner Palace, but needless to say, that was not the only expertise she was capable of.

She was qualified enough to lead all the waiting maids in the Inner Palace in place of Supervisory Maid Amanda without any problems, if she ever felt like it.

Zenjirou stood with his back to the window as Ines approached him. She dropped an elegant curtsy in front of him and reported the matter.

“Sir Raffaelo Márguez requests an audience with you. What may I tell him?”

“Oh, he does?”

He was about to ask her what he should do, but quickly swallowed down these words.

(Oops. I'm still too used to leave all the decisions to Aura.)

Self-reflecting, Zenjirou quickly mused on his own.

He had arrived here in Valentia literally a moment ago, but had done so through Aura's "Teleport" magic, so he was not the least bit exhausted from the trip, to the point that it did not even feel like he had gone to the faraway coast in the west until he had looked out of the window.

As far as he was concerned, he would have liked to have some time to get accustomed to the climate and customs here, but this was not a vacation.

It was a business trip, so it was only natural to bring forward work.

(The question is if I'm risking to be 'looked down on' when I accept his request right away.)

Zenjirou recalled his lessons with Lady Octavia, but unfortunately could not remember something that was a good match for his current situation.

In that case, he had to make a decision for himself.

After pondering for a moment, he began to speak.

"Okay. I'll meet him. Prepare a room."

Since he did not know whether it was right to meet him or not, he decided to abide by his preferences. And his way of proceeding was to get work done as soon as possible.

"Yes, as you wish."

The middle-aged maid lowered her head respectfully upon the instructions of her master.

Approximately one hour later.

In one room of the residence, Zenjirou met the man, who called himself Raffaelo Márguez.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Master Zenjirou. I am Raffaelo, the eldest son of Manuel, the current head of the Márguez Family.

I cannot thank you enough for agreeing to meet me so suddenly today.”

Smoothly delivering his greeting, the man bowed elegantly. Zenjirou remained seated in his chair as he watched him.

(So that’s Raffaelo Márguez. One of Aura’s former husband candidates…)

He was probably in his early thirties and had an average height and build. His looks were personable, but not distinct enough to call him beautiful.

If anything, his features were too average to leave a bigger impression. At least he was not as rememberable as General Puyol Guillén, whom you would never forget again after meeting once.

“It’s okay. I wanted to talk to you, too. For now, sit down.”

Even after more than one year, Zenjirou was still not used to speak in an haughty tone, but this time he used it with pleasure.

His dislike for the former husband candidate of his wife made his sharp tongue and condescending manner appear more natural.

“Yes, thank you.”

Raffaelo sat down in a chair across from Zenjirou with a large rectangle table in-between them.

The motion for setting the chair in place for himself was bizarrely unobtrusive as well. It must have been some kind of "elegant movement". He had internalised to move smoothly without upsetting those, who watched him.

"Speak up, Sir Raffaelo. Did you already meet with the girl, who claims to be a 'princess from the North Continent'?"

Zenjirou folded his hands on the table and asked, whereupon Raffaelo Márguez nodded a bit.

"Yes. We only exchanged pleasantries for a bit, though, because I was only 'sent' here by Her Majesty three days ago as well."

The rumour that a self-proclaimed princess from the Uppsala Kingdom had arrived on a ship with four masts, was spreading so fast that probably everyone in Valentia already knew about it.

And it goes without saying, since there was no way to hide the giant four-master anchoring in the harbour.

"Give me a brief synopsis. What was the princess like?"

"Hmm, her name is Freya Uppsala and she is a girl of seventeen or eighteen years. According to herself, she is the crown princess of the Uppsala Kingdom, which lies on the North Continent."

"Any credibility?"

Raffaelo answered the short question from Zenjirou without missing a beat, as if he had prepared his reply beforehand.

"If my personal opinion is all right with you: I would like to think that she is saying the truth. Her manners were slightly

different, probably because of the difference in customs of our countries, but her way of behaving and speaking seemed sophisticated and habitual to me."

In this case, her youth actually gave her more credibility.

Admittedly, this world also had clever con artists, who could act aristocratic to the point that even real nobility and royalty were fooled, but these people had inevitably gone through decades of training. The age of Princess Freya made that impossible.

"I see."

Keeping his expression in check, Zenjirou nodded once.

Aura had said that they could assume that she was indeed the real deal, because she had a large ship with four masts, and she seemed to be right. Needless to say being a real princess did not rule out the possibility that she was trickster.

After all, royalty was more or less resorting to deception when negotiating for their country.

If you underestimated her for being a young girl, you were at risk of losing everything.

"Since you only greeted her, you don't know their motive yet?"

"No. I have not inquired about that so far. But she mentioned it was more or less a coincidence that they ended up here. They were indeed heading for the South Continent, but apparently got into a storm on the open sea and veered off course."

"Aha…?"

Zenjirou could not hide his surprise towards the report from Raffaelo, and widened his eyes a bit.

When they arrived here by chance through a storm, then there ship was definitely damaged. That in turn meant that they could get their hands on some of the know-how of the large four-master by lending a helping hand for their repairs out of "good-will" instead of providing something in exchange for it during negotiations.

Anyway, as long as it was within Aura's expectations, he had already been instructed on how to act, so Zenjirou did not have to pause for a decision.

"Then we have to provide the manpower to repair their ship. If the ship's damaged, we are to do our best to fix it. That's the will of her Majesty Aura, too."

"Yes, very well. I will act upon it immediately."

Zenjirou emphasized the fact that it was an intention of Aura as well, and whether he understood the implication or not, Raffaelo simply affirmed it without changing his composed facial expression.

(Immediately, eh. Guess he's exactly the guy Aura said he would be.)

When Zenjirou heard his answer, he assessed the man sitting across from him with that in mind.

Aura had described the man known as Raffaelo Márguez as a "civil servant, who was extremely capable, but also passive beyond help".

In other words, he would bring about the best results as long as he had received orders, but would never be proactive himself.

If anything, that type of man was rare in the Carpa Kingdom, where ambitious men were in the majority.

Aura might have readily accepted him as her husband, if his loyalty were to be directed at the country itself instead of his family.

“Nevertheless, the craftsmen in Valentia do have their own jobs during the day. Of course I will try to make them cooperate as much as possible, but it remains questionable if they alone can repair such a big ship.

With your consent, I would like to call in some craftsmen from ‘outside’.”

Raffaelo Márguez kept a straight face without so much as batting an eye as he proposed that with a calm voice.

Zenjirou kept cool, too, when responded contrived to the suggestion.

“Aha. And by ‘outside’, you mean craftsmen from the County of Márguez?”

On a rare occasion, his words had an obvious tinge of sarcasm, but the successor to Count Márguez answered in the affirmative without wiping the smile from his face.

“Yes. I regret to say that I, despite my advanced age, have hardly ever left my home domain so far, so I am afraid that have rather few connections to others. Fortunately enough, the County of Márguez is not that far away from Valentia.”

“I see…”

“I would be delighted to get your approval.”

“But you need the permission of the Queen to bring people from other domains into Valentia.”

“Please rest assured. My Father and Her Majesty have already come to an understanding in the Capital. Here is the relevant document.”

With these words, Raffaelo pulled out a four-fold dragonskin parchment from his pocket and put it onto the table.

Zenjirou glanced at Ines, who stood at attention next to him. The middle-aged maid recognized the cue, smoothly moved over to the table, picked up the parchment and handed it to Zenjirou.

“Hmm…”

Zenjirou skimmed over the opened parchment, but much to his sorrow, he could not even read half of it. He did studied a bit every night, but so far he could only understand the language used in the Carpa Kingdom as good as a Japanese middle school student understood English.

For now, he recognized the signs of Aura and Count Márguez under the document, then returned the parchment to the waiting maid.

She took it and set it down on the table in such a way that Zenjirou could see it as well. Then she read it out aloud with a clear voice.

“I will read it now.

During his appointment as the assistant of Zenjirou Carpa, Raffaelo Márguez is given free rein in regards to…”

The content of the dragonskin parchment read aloud by the waiting maid Ines, was more or less exactly what Raffaelo had said before.

In short, it registered the right for Raffaelo Márguez to call in more personnel from outside during the current affair, when

there was a shortage of manpower to resolve any circumstances.

In that case, the Márguez Family had to shoulder all the expenses for the personnel from outside, though.

(I see. In other words, the Márguez get a piece of the cake, too. In exchange, Raffaelo will play the faithful subordinate here and the Márguez cover a part of the expenses, too.)

It should go without saying, but Queen Aura and Count Márguez had already reached an agreement on this matter for the most part.

The reason that Aura had not told Zenjirou about it directly was that it was part of the advertisement to the Márguez Family that "Zenjirou was merely a figurehead and Raffaelo in charge".

Personally speaking, Zenjirou naturally had wanted to be filled in beforehand, but also realized that Aura was way better than him in making such decisions.

"Fine. You seem to be saying the truth. When Her Majesty has given you permission, I can't object. Do what's necessary."

Zenjirou spoke with a callous tone, as if he had stopped caring.

* * *

"Damn, I hardly slept at all."

On the next day, that honest proclamation was the first thing Zenjirou said when he woke up after spending the night in the residence of the Duke of Valentia.

Amidst the faint sunlight that crept in through the gaps of the tightly closed wooden shutters, he stretched himself abundantly on the bed to vitalize his sleepy body.

“Uh… Ugh…”

Technically, his night had lasted longer than usual, but he still felt sleep-deprived.

Although he had expected to face some inconveniences outside the Inner Palace, he clearly had been naïve in his thinking.

The hottest season was already over, but the nights in the Carpa Kingdom were still sultry. And now his body could not adopt to the sultriness, because he had set up the air conditioning in his bedroom at home.

The only proper light he had was the crank-powered LED flashlight he had brought with him from the Capital, so it was not easy to stay up doing something, either.

His cell phone could be charged through that crank-powered flashlight, so he had brought it with him as a clock, but his game consoles were all left at home. Zenjirou was regretting his choice a bit now.

Because he was playing less and less with the game consoles these days, he had not felt the need to bring them along, but now that he had spent a night in Valentia, he noticed that he had a lot more spare time than expected.

Thinking back, the reason why he recently no longer played games at night was that he spent his time either discussing things with Aura or training his magic.

But needless to say, neither Aura, nor his computer, which replayed the spells with the correct intonation, were here right now.

Admittedly, he could practice his control over the magical output, even without such a playback device, but Zenjirou was not blessed with enough patience to just keep staring at his own hands for hours while increasing and decreasing the emission of magical power, respectively.

As a result, he had not known what to do with his free time, so he had turned off the lights and gone to bed early, even though he had not been sleepy.

“Man, I was a bit too naïve. I’ve got to try harder to acclimatize here.”

Dressed in his blue pyjama, he said this and quickly got out of the bed.

For his pyjama as well as his leisure wear and underwear he had brought along the clothes from Earth.

Aura had reminded him that he would have to wear the official attire non-stop for his duties during the day, and advised him to wear something comfortable in private at least or he would come to regret it later. Taking her piece of advice to heart, he had packed a considerable amount of clothes and it seemed to pay off.

Even in his familiar pyjama he had slept badly. If he had worn the traditional nightwear, he might have not gotten a wink of sleep.

“Back then during business trips, I could sleep just fine in the provided bathrobe of the hotels, though. Guess I can’t compare a hotel in Japan with a residence in a different world.”

While saying that, he fumbled around to open the wooden shutters.

“! Gah, the sun sure is bright here.”

When the morning sun flooded the room, Zenjirou narrowed his eyes to slits.

At that moment, the door was knocked.

Like always, he wanted to respond with “Yes, come in” at once, but swallowed down these words in the nick of time.

This was not the Inner Palace. The casual tone he always used there never got him into trouble, because he could trust the waiting maids of the Inner Palace to keep their mouth shut up about it.

Normally it would not be well-received when he interacted casually with the waiting maids as royalty. Not only would it damage his own reputation, it could possibly have a bad influence on Aura as well for taking such a man as her husband.

“What’s the matter?”

Zenjirou varnished his way of speaking and expression for public appearance, then spoke to beyond the door.

“Y- Yes, excuse me for disturbing your rest. I brought your change of clothes.”

As expected, an unfamiliar voice of a nervous young waiting maid resounded from the other side of the door.

“Enter.”

Although Zenjirou was a bit fed up with having to use a stage phrasing in his own room as well, he bluntly gave his permission.

“Yes, excuse me.”

The door opened with these words and three young waiting maids entered the room.

The first maid opened the door, the following maid carried the third formal attire for male royalty in her hands and the last maid closed the door behind her.

Their demeanour indicated sophistication as servants beyond their years, but the tanned faces of the girls were pitifully ravaged by nervousness.

Well, no surprise. Zenjirou was the third most, if not second most important person in this country. The waiting maids in the Inner Palace had gotten to know him, but the people of Valentia had only heard rumours about him, so to them he simply was a “man with enough power to easily execute them if he felt like it”.

Foolish nobility that punished their servants for fun was a minority in the Carpa Kingdom, no doubt, but at this point, the girls did not even know enough about Zenjirou to judge whether he belonged to that minority or not.

“Good morning, Master Zenjirou. We have come to help you get changed.”

The three young maids bowed towards him, whereupon Zenjirou tried his best not to sound friendly in his reply.

“Good. Go ahead.”

He put forth an effort to appear calm and understanding in order to ease the unfounded nervousness of the girls while maintaining a dignity, so he would not be called a failure as royalty.

That act was rather tiring, but he told himself that it was also part of his job. Still in his pyjamas, he spread his arms a bit and waited for the maids to approach him.

From his point of view, it was rather embarrassing to have young girls help him get changed, but he still could not put on the “third formal attire” by himself, because of its complicated dressing method and tieing strings.

Of course he could take off the pyjama by himself, but there was no meaning in doing only that by himself when he could not continue afterwards.

So he had spread his arms resigned and expressionless. Thereupon the three waiting maids skilfully took off his pyjama and dressed him in the third formal attire.

Feeling bashful about posing as a dress-up doll without saying anything, Zenjirou broached an harmless subject.

“Actually, where’s Ines?”

The maids flinched for a moment when their temporary master suddenly called out to them, but one of them answered him right away.

“Mrs. Ines has gone to the kitchen to issue instructions. Afterwards, she wanted to arrange today’s schedule with Sir Raffaelo and Sir Damian.”

In the Inner Palace, Ines had only been in charge of cleaning, but here in Valentia, she was the Supervisory Maid in effect and kind of acted as a secretary for Zenjirou at the same time. In a way, she was busier than Zenjirou, the nominal delegate, and Raffaelo Márguez, the actual delegate.

After the waiting maids finished dressing him, Zenjirou briefly looked at himself in the big glass mirror from the Inner Palace and then checked with the maids.

“I’m supposed to meet Princess Freya after breakfast, but when do I head to the dining room?”

“The cooking staff is preparing breakfast right now. As soon as it is done, someone will come for you, so please wait here until then.”

His calm tone and facial expression seemed to have eased a bit of their nervousness, since the young waiting maids now answered smoothly and clearly.

“I see. Fine. You’re dismissed until then.”

But the maids looked a bit troubled at each other when he said that. A person of noble rank with servants usually did not mind the presence of maids in the room.

If anything, it was the custom to have at least one servant around for the purpose of issuing demands at any time.

Going by that common sense, it was not commendable to dictate their retreat now. Zenjirou was aware of that, but it would suffocate him to be attended by maids all day long.

Even if it seemed dubious, he had to insist on this selfishness.

“You‘re dismissed.”

“Y- Yes.”

“Very well.”

“Please call for us if you need anything.”

When he gave them the order again, the waiting maids obediently complied, albeit perplexed.

Too unsettled to savour the breakfast he took together with the Governor of Valentia and Raffaelo Márguez, Zenjirou was then going to meet with the “self-proclaimed princess” at last.

The meeting took place in the hall of the residence of the Duke of Valentia. In terms of the Royal Palace, this room equalled the audience chamber.

It did not have an elevated throne like the audience chamber in the Royal Palace, but they had prepared a chair in the back of the room that visualized the authority of the Duke of Valentia.

Needless to say, only the Duke of Valentia was allowed to sit down in that chair.

The governor was always staying in his own residence next door for government affairs in Valentia, and it surely would not be tolerated that Zenjirou sat down in that chair, either, even if he was vested with a special authority.

Having said that, it would be too disrespectful to make a royalty stand, so they quickly had set up an equally imposing chair next to the Duke's chair, on which Zenjirou was sitting now.

Acting as dignified as possible, Zenjirou prevented his legs from shaking from nervousness with all his might while he sat on the chair in question. On his right stood Raffaelo Márguez and on his left Ines, the maid.

Raffaelo was the eldest son of a very influential noble family in the country, whereas Ines was nothing but a mere maid, yet they stood practically on the same level. That was necessary, though, since Raffaelo was officially assigned as "Zenjirou's personal assistant" right now.

As they stood there, the door was pushed open before long and the awaited person entered.

Beyond the large door that had been opened by the two guards serving in the residence of the Duke of Valentia, appeared the figure of a single girl.

(So that's the 'self-proclaimed princess'? She definitely got the aura of a royalty, just like Raffaelo said. But she doesn't have a lot of magical power. And is that a female bodyguard behind her? Looks like she almost got the same amount of magical power as the princess. Maybe the princess is limiting her magical power deliberately?)

Still sitting on the accurately carved wooden chair, Zenjirou carefully observed the two women approaching him.

In accordance with the report from Raffaelo, the one walking in front must be the "self-proclaimed crown princess of the Uppsala Kingdom": Freya Uppsala.

Just like he had mentioned, she looked like she was in her late teens.

The first thing that caught his eye when he saw Princess Freya was her hairstyle.

With its blue-tinged silver shade, the hair had a mysterious colour and was cleanly cut at a length around her nape.

Whatever the case may be on the North Continent, but a woman with short hair was extremely rare on the South Continent. There was one girl with short hair in the Inner Palace, but she had no other choice but to keep it short, because its strong tendency to frizz when letting it grow made it impossible to comb into place.

However, Princess Freya had obviously glamorous straight hair. To the point that it was a waste to cut it short like this.

(Maybe a short haircut is nothing special on the North Continent?)

Zenjirou considered that for a moment, but her attire was far from normal as well.

Simply put, Princess Freya was wearing “clothes for a captain”. The bottom half consisted of white trousers and overknee boots, whereas the upper half was made up of something like a white shirt and a blazer-like jacket above it, which was held together by a leather belt.

It was a strange outfit that looked like a combination of a navy officer uniform from modern times and a senior sailor uniform from the Age of Discovery. Either way, it obviously looked like it was made for men.

(She cut her hair short and wears men’s clothing. Is she ‘cross-dressing’? But she definitely called herself a ‘princess’, so she’s not really thorough in her disguise.)

Pretty much as his inner monologue said, Princess Freya was wearing clothes for men without a doubt, but it was honestly unthinkable that she was trying to hide her true gender through that.

Her chest, covered by a blue scarf around her neck, was by no means bountiful, but still showcased soft bulges that made it impossible to personate a man. And the tightly strapped belt around her waist actually highlighted the womanly curves from her hips to her bottom.

As the cross-dressing girl advanced, she was stopped from the side by an utterance from Valentia’s Governor Damian.

“Please stop right there. Excuse us, but we are going to venture to subject you to a body search now.”

His words made the tall female soldier behind the princess argue forcefully.

“What insolence! Who do you think you are dealing here with!”

The atmosphere suddenly turned grim.

But that was not the fault of either side. If anything, both side were in the right.

Princess Freya was the crown princess of a country, so it was only natural that her bodyguard snapped when they wanted to subject her to a “body search”.

From the point of view of the governor on the other hand, it had only been his duty to clear up any doubts before letting an unverified “self-proclaimed princess” near one of only three royalty of his own country.

“I am well aware of my act of discourtesy. Nonetheless, I cannot allow even the slightest possibility of Master Zenjirou coming to harm, to be unregarded. You have my assurance that we will definitely make amends for it in some kind of way later on. As such, please obey us.”

“Then you should have done so while we waited in the other room! Why do you need to put the princess to shame here!”

“That would have hardly ruled out all the doubts.”

Even if she had been subjected to a body search in the next room and nothing had been found, it could not be ruled out that she somehow obtained some kind of weapon on her way here. That was what the governor must have wanted to say, but to Zenjirou it sounded a bit like hair-splitting.

(Maybe he wants to straighten out the ‘hierarchy’ right from the beginning by doing a body search here?)

Inferring like that, Zenjirou glanced at Raffaelo Márguez standing next to him, but his temporary assistant kept a composed expression and made no signs to intervene.

In that case, it was hardly his place to say anything, since they expected him to be just a “figurehead” unless it called for a final

decision. With that train of thought, he relaxed his shoulders and decided to wait and see what happened for now.

The Princess Freya in question remained silent while her bodyguard continued her critique.

“Two can play at that game! I am the bodyguard of the princess, so I have the duty to keep her out of harm’s way as well!”

Saying that, the tall female soldier clenched her fist, which was exceptional large for a woman. At that moment,

“Pardon me. It falls on me to conduct the inspection of Her Highness.”

Ines stepped forward from her position next to Zenjirou before the female soldier was at daggers drawn, and lowered her head deeply.

“Wha!?”

In spite of the exaggerated outburst of the bodyguard, Ines kept her head lowered as she explained.

“Needless to say, I will do my utmost so as not to harm Her Highness. Everything will be undertaken behind this and you are included as well, so please watch over Her Highness.”

Ines looked to the side, where four waiting maids were waiting with a piece of cloth in their hands that looked like a large blackout curtain.

It meant that they were going to conduct the body search within that curtain, well out of sight of others.

Although it was a body search, she would not have to get completely naked. They would strip her to her underwear at best and then frisk her for hidden weapons, but even if it was

done by a woman and away from the eyes of others, it was still quite humiliating.

“B- But!”

As the female soldier still did not give in, she now was reprimanded by Princess Freya, who had been silent so far.

“Leave it be, Skathi.”

“But, Milady!”

The snow-white skin, which was out of the ordinary after travelling by boat for so long, in her face flushed a bit when Princess Freya looked at her faithful bodyguard and spoke with a composed tone.

“I am standing here without any actual credentials to who I am. Their wariness is by no means mistaken.”

Instead of saying she had no credentials, it would more accurate to say that there was no one around, who could attest the authenticity of her credentials.

On their ship, the “Yellow Leaves”, they had things like a treasured sword with the family crest of the Uppsala Kingdom, or a tiara with a blue sapphire that was only bestowed to female royalty. But the people of the Carpa Kingdom neither knew the family crest of the Uppsala Kingdom, nor their customs, so they would only tilt their heads puzzled, even if they were shown these things.

Of course they would understand that she was no ordinary girl when they saw the brilliance of the large jewel or the marvellous ornaments on the sword, but it still would not prove her “noble birth”.

“Much obliged, Your Highness. Excuse us then. Girls.”

“Yes!”

Upon the order from Ines, the four waiting maids took the large blackout curtain and concealed Ines, Princess Freya and the female soldier.

“…..”

Unexpectedly, everyone outside the curtain kept quiet.

Due to that, it was possible to not only hear the rustling sound of clothes as Princess Freya and the female soldier took off their clothes, but also the faint clapping sound as they were frisked.

Before long, Ines said “okay, we are done. Thank you every much for your cooperation” and the waiting maids quickly withdrew the curtain.

Coming back into the picture, Ines took one step forward and bowed respectfully.

“Please forgive my discourtesy. Nothing did state a problem.”

Following these words, the governor of Valentia likewise offered an apology.

“I beg your pardon, Princess Freya. Please come forward now.”

“Not at all. You merely did your duty.”

Keeping a dignified facial expression, Princess Freya told him that without breaking eye contact, then gracefully stepped forward.

When she did so, Zenjirou mused for a second, then “stood up” from his chair to welcome the approaching princess of the other country.

He was a Prince Consort, whereas Princess Freya was a crown princess. In normal circumstances, his status did not require him to stand up from his chair, even if her claim to be a crown

princess was legit. Likewise, it did not really cause a problem when he stood up, because they were nearly on the same level, but by doing so without having the need to, he wanted to express an apology he was not allowed to put into words.

The cross-dressing princess and her female bodyguard stopped at the assigned position. Still standing, Zenjirou looked at them and began to speak, extra carefully that his voice did not quaver.

“I am Zenjirou Carpa, the husband of Her Majesty Aura, the Queen of the Capra Kingdom. By rights, Her Majesty would be here as the Duchess of Valentia, but she cannot leave the capital at the moment. Thus, I am here as her representative. A pleasure meeting you.”

He reeled the speech he had prepared last night off word by word, whereupon the cross-dressing princess took a step back with her right feet and bowed.

“I am Captain Freya of the ‘Yellow Leaves’, the eight ship in the fleet of the Uppsala Kingdom.

It is a great honour to make your acquaintance, Your Majesty Zenjirou.

Also, as the crown princess and second child of Gustav V, the current king of the Uppsala Kingdom, I do wish that this meeting will be a good opportunity for our two countries to grow closer to each other.”

“Yes, I hope so, too.”

While giving an appropriate response, Zenjirou went through the greeting of Princess Freya in his head once more.

(She introduced herself as a captain first, instead of a princess. Does that mean she wants to be treated as a captain here rather than royalty?)

As he was bad at improvising, he certainly did not approve of this unexpected turn of events.

(Ehm, I was actually supposed to change my way of speaking as soon as her title was on the table, but I guess I'll carry on as before.)

Coming to that conclusion, Zenjirou shifted his gaze to the female soldier standing behind Princess Freya.

"Well then, why don't you introduce her as well? She seems quite capable."

Of course that was nothing but a bluff. Zenjirou was definitely not able to judge the skills of a soldier from just a glance.

During breakfast this morning, Sir Damian had told him that she had killed a Sea Dragon with her throwing spear in one hit.

Furthermore, he was told that a Sea Dragon had really thick skin and a high vitality, so it was technically impossible to kill it with one hit, even if you hit a vital spot by chance, unless you threw the spear with quite the force.

Seeing as the female soldier had accomplished exactly that, it proved that she was a first-rate soldier without doubt.

Princess Freya smiled proudly and looked at her retainer standing behind her at an angle, then spoke.

"Yes. Let me introduce her:

Victoria Kronkvist. A proud warrior of our country and my bodyguard."

"….."

Being introduced, the female soldier bowed her head stiffly without saying a word.

“I see. Quite the reliable bodyguard you have there.”

While saying that, he looked at the female soldier— at Victoria Kronkvist again.

She looked like she was in her late twenties. Her long blonde hair was tied in a ponytail, her eyes were auburn and her skin seemed to have originally been white, as it was usual for people on the North Continent, but right now it was completely tanned from the sun at sea.

However, none of these colours caught the eye of any beholder first.

(So tall…)

Zenjirou unwittingly looked up to the face of the female soldier.

Even though he stood at a distance, he could not see her face unless he wittingly put his head back. That was how tall she was.

(She’s even taller than Fatima, not just Aura. And she isn’t as delicate as Fatima, at that.)

If his senses could be trusted, Princess Freya in front of him would be around one hundred and sixty centimetre tall. The female soldier stood even further afar, behind the princess, but she still looked half a head taller than her, so her height must be at least one hundred and eighty-five centimetre.

Moreover, her body was so well-trained that you could tell even through the leather armour she was wearing. Because she had more or less sloping shoulders, which were also relative small for her height, she did not have such an imposing physique as

Aura, but her arms, tights and bottom were definitely those of a versed soldier.

If he had wanted to see a woman of her calibre on modern Earth, he would have had to go to a world tournament of women's volleyball or basketball.

(Still, she doesn't stand out despite this. When she's just standing there, Princess Freya is actually attracting more attention.)

Instead of the female soldier being plain, it rather meant that Princess Freya had so much more of something that made herself conspicuous.

Anyway, Zenjirou addressed a point that had bothered him in the introduction just now.

"Victoria Kronkvist, I see. But, did you not call her by a different name earlier, Princess Freya?"

When faced with his question, Princess Freya showed a proud expression as if to say "I am glad you ask", while she answered.

"That is a title given to her. Our country has the custom to bestow the name of a past Hero onto a proud warrior.

'Skathi' was the name of a female soldier, who has made a name for herself as a valiant and excellent sorceress in the olden days."

"I see."

The practice of bestowing a special name as a title to outstanding warriors was not a rare event on Earth, either.

He did not know how important the name "Skathi" was, but considering that she was appointed as the bodyguard of the

princess, she definitely was one of the top soldiers in her country.

“…..”

Nevertheless, she was only here as a “bodyguard for Princess Freya”. Unless the princess was in danger, she was going to remain silent, so it was not really necessary to pay any attention to her for now.

Determining that, Zenjirou shifted his gaze again, this time from the female soldier back to the cross-dressing princess.

“Okay. Princess Freya, I welcome you and your companions as guests in the Carpa Kingdom, here in the residence of the Duke of Valentia.

We prepared a guest house for you, so you can move in there today. And of course your ship is allowed to stay in the harbour.

I, Zenjirou Carpa, guarantee your safety in the name of Her Majesty Queen Aura.

Consult my assistant for the details. Raffaelo.”

He turned to the side with these words, whereupon the oldest son of Count Márguez standing next to him bowed respectfully.

“Yes, very well. Princess Freya, from now on I will be at your disposal for anything, so please feel free to call upon me anytime.”

“Pleasure.”

Raffaelo bowed his head deeply, whereas Princess Freya spoke in a polite tone without lowering her head. If anything, she was jutting her chin forward a bit when she responded.

* * *

“Fuh…”

Zenjirou heaved a sigh of relief only after he had went back to his own room and was all alone with Ines.

“Are you alright, Master Zenjirou? If you are feeling uncomfortable, you may take off some clothes. I can help you put them on again by myself.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Unable to resist the temptation, he ruthlessly loosened the sash and strings of his trousers and slumped into the couch.

The only times he was allowed to drop the dignified act of royalty was either when he was all by himself or when only Ines was with him.

Except for the period before retiring to bed, Zenjirou was hardly ever alone during the day. Ines was quite busy as the temporary Supervisory Maid, but she tried to stay with him as much as possible, so he was really grateful to her.

“Princess Freya and her group have moved into the guest house without problems.”

“Mh. I gotta thank Sir Raffaelo later. Are we doing everything to make the princess feel comfortable?”

“We are not.”

“Wait. Not?”

Zenjirou exclaimed surprised when the middle-aged maid admitted it so bluntly.

And he had all reason to be surprised. He had acknowledged Princess Freya as “royalty from the North Continent” and she and her group were honoured guests now. It would be bad if they were not doing everything for their well-being. At least they should be obliged to do as much as possible.

“What’s the problem?”

Leaning forward on the couch, Zenjirou asked her, and Ines replied with a little wry smile.

“Well, I did phrase that a bit infelicitous, but to be honest, she ’cannot stand the heat’.”

“O- Oh… That’s nothing we can fix, though.”

Upon the answer of the maid, Zenjirou slumped back into the couch convinced.

“Espaldion said they’re coming from the far north of the North Continent after all. In terms of Earth that would mean they’re coming from somewhere around Northern Europe or Greenland. Hm, and we’re something like Africa near the equator or South India?”

He roughly classified the different climates of the Uppsala and Carpa Kingdoms and sympathized with Princess Freya from the bottom of his heart.

Actually, his knowledge about it was only half-baked. In reality, some cities in Northern Europe did experience a summer with temperatures over thirty degree Celsius, but luckily for him, the “Uppsala Kingdom” of this world was really a cold region that rarely ever saw days with temperatures over twenty degrees even during summer.

Thus his concern had been valid.

Although the hottest season had already passed, the maximum temperature around here still often went beyond thirty-five degree at noon.

It was understandable that Princess Freya and her group complained about that heat.

“At least see to it that they have enough water. And listen to their requests for food as much as possible, too.”

That was all he could think of, though. Separated from his electrical appliances in the Inner Palace, he was way below his best.

“Very well. I will instruct them to refill the water drums as often as possible. If feasible, I would like to get more personnel for that, so I will consult with Sir Damian later on.”

Ines bowed curtly, then said in reply.

There were a couple of wells around the guest house as well, but still too few, considering the size of the residence, so water drums were placed at places too far away from the wells, where they then could scoop water.

Compared to the well water directly taken from underground, the water would inevitably turn lukewarm in no time after it had been scooped into the drums. Therefore it was necessary to exchange the water regularly, but needless to say, that was no easy job, not even for a grown man. So it was no surprise that Ines requested an increase in personnel.

“Mh, good. I’m sure it’ll be a stiff piece of work, but do your best, so that they have it as comfortable as possible. Or at least, I want them to see we’re in earnest.”

“Yes, very well.”

It was still unknown how the negotiations with Princess Freya would turn out from now on, but Zenjirou wanted to put her into a good mood first, since they already had put her to shame through that “body check” earlier on.

He realized that it probably had all been part of the plan and as a quasi outsider, he had no intention to interfere, but personally speaking, he rather wanted the negotiations to be in all earnestness.

“Thanks. By the way, what does my schedule say for later?”

Changing the topic, he asked this, whereupon the capable maid responded right away.

“As scheduled, they will be talking of actual business for a while now, discussing demands and compensations, so you will not meet with Princess Freya directly anymore.

Sir Raffaelo will lead the negotiations and report the progress to you in the evening. Except for that, you will be off duty for the rest of the day.”

Although he did have the final say in matters, they were not expecting him to probe the partner and strike a deal profitable for both sides.

As long as the business meeting lasted, he had a relatively large surplus of free time.

“Damn. I should’ve bought a game console to kill time after all.”

He was well aware of the fact that, no matter how bored he may be, he would impose on everyone if he were to take a walk to kill time.

“Boredom” was a troublesome condition that became more painful the longer it lasted, so he should quickly think of a way to kill time without bothering others.

For now, Zenjirou suggested the idea he had come up with during breakfast this morning to Ines.

“Say, there are lot of ‘mussel dishes’ here, right? Do you know what they do with the shells?”

Bewildered about the sudden and vague question of her master, the middle-aged maid gently tilted her head, but answered honestly nevertheless.

“I would say they are tossing them away, because there is no real use for them.”

Getting the reply he had expected, he smiled a bit.

“Good. Can you get the shells for me? I also want an hammer, a stone mortar and some people that know how to use them. Oh, I want some coast sand, too. If possible, the sparkling white one.”

And requested these things. It goes without saying that he was trying to make “slaked lime” and “silica sand”, which were the basic components for making glass.

The slaked lime and silica sand that had been used for the glass production experiments so far, had been made from freshwater lake shells and inland sand. They never tried any shells or sand from Valentia.

Ines did not understand what he wanted to do with all that, but assessed that it would be no problem to obtain it, so she consented to it.

“Understood. I will prepare it at once.

However, it might be better to send a Small Flying Dragon and let Her Majesty Aura send a few waiting maids of the Inner Palace over here, if your undertaking is going to take longer.”

Zenjirou completely agreed with her idea.

“Yeah, that would be great, even if it’s going to trouble Aura and the maids. I just can’t relax around the maids here.”

For Ines, it was a welcome development as well. There were enough waiting maids here to manage any manual labour, but Zenjirou could not interact as honest with any of them as he did with the waiting maids of the Inner Palace.

Having said this, it would hardly take any pressure off Ines, even if the waiting maids of the Inner Palace were to come here, since Aura had instructed her to stay close to Zenjirou as much as possible.

“Well then, I will write up a letter for the Small Flying Dragon. Please sign it later.”

“Mh, sure. Thanks.”

Still slumping into the couch, Zenjirou gave a short nod to Ines when she uttered that.

* * *

Around the same time in the guest house of the residence of the Duke of Valentia, Princess Freya was talking with her trusted retainer, the female soldier, in a large room after things had settled down a bit.

“It is a nice room. These ‘slippers’ are quite intriguing as well.”

Saying that, Princess Freya ungraciously dangled her feet while sitting on the couch. She was no longer “cross-dressing” and wore a light-blue long dress now.

Although she did not wear many accessories, the beautifully glittering dress and applied make-up made her look exactly like a “secluded beauty”, to the point that her short hair no longer mattered.

The tall female soldier on the other hand frowned in light of the assertion of her master.

“I cannot bring myself to like them. This sorry excuse for a shoe will prevent me from getting a good foothold in crucial times and a shield bearer can easily immobilize me in one hit by stomping my toes.

Milady, may I switch to my leather shoes? I will even wipe the soles properly.”

Apparently the Uppsala Kingdom had no house shoe culture. Princess Freya shook her head with a smile to the troubled female soldier.

“You must not, Skathi. When on land, do as the landsmen do. When on the sea, do as the seamen do. Do not cause ripples here.”

The saying “when on the land, do as the landsmen do. When on the sea, do as the seamen do” was the equivalent to the Earth saying: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do”.

The female Soldier— Skathi replied affirming with “yes”, albeit reluctantly.

Then she took a stance in the slippers in order to test how good she could fight in the current condition.

“How is it? Think you can fight?”

When Princess Freya asked her, Skathi tried out a few more moves.

“Yes. It is not as disturbing as I thought it would be. Presumable because it has a leathern sole. I think this will work somehow.”

Then she said this and clapped the steel sword hanging on the left side of her waist with a confident expression.

The scabbard was made of leather and was reinforced by iron at the top and bottom. The corresponding sword was plain without any decorations, but it was definitely sharper and more durable than any sword forged in the Carpa Kingdom.

The Uppsala Kingdom was a prominent technology developed country on the North Continent. The average amount of magical power of its citizens was low and its royalty did not have a bloodline magic, either. The reason that they could preserve their independence despite that was their technology level.

“Really? Glad to hear. I doubt that they will do anything rash, considering their earlier behaviour, but better safe than sorry. I am counting on you if needed, Skathi.”

“Yes, leave it to me. I will not let anyone lay a finger on you, Milady.”

The tall female soldier kept her left hand attached to the sword on her waist and proudly threw out her chest.

“Good. Anyway, I did expected it already, but I guess we really cannot prevent the technology of our ship to be figured out.”

After she showed her trusted retained a wry smile, Princess Freya broached a serious subject with a stern expression.

The tension of her master seemed to have affected the female soldier as her expression turned demure as well.

“Yes. I am not well-versed about ships, either, but the damage we suffered during that storm seems to be grave. Our own

shipwrights say that repairs are possible, but it is going to take quite a lot of time and manpower."

She cited the current state of affairs.

The "Yellow Leaves" had overcome a long journey from the northern part of the North Continent to the central part of the South Continent. The accumulated wear and tear of such a long trip plus the latest damage of the storm might not be recognizable by an amateur, but the practiced eye of an expert could tell at a glance that the ship was badly affected.

At any rate, a long voyage like between continents was not be taken lightly.

Princess Freya could unwind around her retainer, so she heaved a deep sigh.

"Indeed… We are not even in a position to negotiate about that. Sir Raffaelo did offer to help us repair the ship in every department for free, but we probably can consider ourselves lucky for that."

"A truly transparent offer."

"Yes, that it is."

Needless to say, the transparency applied to the intention of Raffaelo Márguez or rather the Carpa Kingdom.

By lending a hand in the repairs of a ship that they could not build themselves, they were trying to steal the know-how for the huge sailing ship.

But, just like Princess Freya had said, she and her group did not even have the option to turn down the helping hand from the Carpa Kingdom, even though they knew about their ulterior motive.

Unless their ship got repaired, they would never get back home. Well, not really, but in the worst case, they would have to travel north on the South Continent by land to a country that had trade relations with the North Continent and board a trading ship there. In this case, they would get indebted to at least two countries: One country on the South Continent with a harbour and one country on the North Continent with a trading ship.

Instead of doing that, it was wiser to just cooperate with the Carpa Kingdom, even if a bit of their technology was stolen in the progress.

“It is pretty likely that our ship technology will be taken one-sidedly, so we might as well cooperate with them and oversee a shipyard for huge sailing ships right here.”

When her master put a hand on her chin and muttered bold plans for the future, the female soldier turned pale.

“Milady, that is going to far.”

“Of course I have no intention of proposing something like that of my own accord. I am merely saying that such an outcome would still be tolerable depending on the circumstances.

Skathi, I find it hard to picture that our country will be able sustain the scale of our current fleet in the coming years if nothing changes.”

Princess Freya lightly bit her lip and said this cautionary with a stern expression.

Known for their excellent iron manufacture, the Uppsala Kingdom was an exporting country for iron goods. The country was so cold that it was covered by snow half of the year and yet, they were a maritime nation, whose harbours never froze over because of the sea current.

The charcoal used for iron manufacture came from trees, the firewood used to drive away the cold came from trees and the main building materials for ships were trees as well.

One did not need to cut down a full-grown tree to get firewood or charcoal, but without any consequences in place, the common people rather banded together, cut down nearby big trees and chopped them into pieces in order to get their firewood and charcoal, instead of going all the way up the mountain to gather firewood.

By the time the royalty noticed the decrease in forest area and issued a verdict, it was almost too late.

Of course the remaining big trees were forbidden to be cut down at once and a reforestation in the whole country was making progress.

However, it was obviously questionable whether these protected trees were enough resources until the reforestation got positive results.

Amongst their various goals for sea travel, the acquirement of wood was especially important.

“I guess it really is impossible to transport the timber for the ships itself?”

The words of the female soldier sound more like a confirmation than a question. Princess Freya answered her straightforward.

“Yes, impossible. There were more Sea Dragons on the way than we thought. Transporting such large wooden beams will greatly impair the balance and speed of the ship, regardless of whether you drag them along behind the ship or stack them on the deck.

We would never make it home, that is for sure.”

The Uppsala Kingdom was in dire need of long and thick timber that they could use as the backbone aka. keel of the huge sailing ships. Accordingly, the beams were nearly as long as the ship itself. It would be absolutely crazy to travel the rough open sea for more than hundred days while pulling these or stacking them onto the deck.

True, they had known from the beginning that the probability was low, but their actual voyage had made them realize that it was in fact impossible, so they were a bit dejected.

But Princess Freya did not let the frustration show on her face and declared to her trusted retainer with a composed pronunciation.

“Well, we can still purchase the necessary wood from the neighbouring countries on the North Continent for a while, if needed. For that reason as well, we need to establish our own trading relations with this continent and make a profit.”

“Trading relations with the South Continent, you mean? The safest way would be ‘sugar’ and ‘spices’, I guess?”

Both sugar and spices were ordinary goods on the South Continent that even commoners consumed daily, but on the North Continent even a pinch of it was paid for with silver coins.

“You are right. Also, dragon leather and bones. I am glad that our freight did not get damaged.”

“Certainly. The partial damage to the furs, wool fabrics and iron goods from the storm is insignificant. We should be able to make quite a profit if we get to exchange them for the usual intercontinental trade rate.”

The North Continent almost had no large dragons, whereas the South Continent on the other hand had almost no large

mammals. Due to that, the bones and leather from dragons fetched a high price on the North Continent, whereas wool fabrics and furs were in great demand on the South Continent.

Having said this, a lot of countries on the North Continent had an exceedingly small demand for dragon bones and leather due to certain circumstances, but fortunately enough, the Uppsala Kingdom was an exception to that.

“Maybe there will be something unique from this country that is otherwise hard to obtain through normal intercontinental trade, but for now, that is all.

Anyway, I put my dear father and brother through a lot, so that they allow me to take this ship. I cannot afford to come back without results. Skathi, I know it will not be an easy path, but please lend me your strength.”

“Of course, my life is yours to command.”

The utterance from the princess prompted the female soldier to attach her left hand to the sword at her waist again as she stood at attention and swore solemnly.

Intermission 1: The Hunt

Meanwhile the Pack Dragon Subjugation Party started its operation for real on the Salt Road after joining with the reinforcements from the Capital lead by General Puyol.

Under his instruction, the soldiers had split up in groups of dozens and were advancing into the mountains while keeping watch over their surroundings.

They cut apart the scrub or sturdy vines that blocked their path with heavy hatchets. The following soldiers cleared the path from that felled scrub and vines, so it would not get into their way. Amongst them walked heavy armoured soldiers with short spears that kept a close eye on their surroundings. And in the safe centre of their team walked a young soldier with a wooden whistle around his neck, ready to blow it as soon as something happened.

The group only amounted to around thirty people, but various other teams with the same line-up were close enough to hear the whistle. General Puyol had given the strict order to blow the whistle by all means and persevere at all costs, if an attack by the Pack Dragons were to happen.

Needless to say, they would surely be able to ward off an attack by one or two Pack Dragons by themselves.

But it was extremely difficult to accurately tell the fighting strength of an incoming attacker in this forest, because of the restricted field of vision.

Valuing the lives of his men above all, the general had thus ordered that the whistle was to be blown without fail at any contact with the enemy, even if their effectivity in operation dropped for a bit.

The endangerment of the soldiers was lessened thanks to the lowered effectivity, though. The longer an expedition lasted, the more tired the soldiers got, which in turn involved more danger. Fortunately enough, they had enough personnel to

work in shifts and their base camp had plenty of black sugar to beat the fatigue and alcohol to ease the stress.

The operation greedily consumed money and supplies, but so General Puyol paid it no mind, since Queen Aura herself had specified to value the lives of the soldiers above all.

He was certain that Queen Aura was content with approach, even if the treasurers in the Capital would screw up their faces.

On the frontlines, one could never have enough personnel and supplies.

While the soldiers were performing their mission like that, the shrill sound of a wooden whistle could suddenly be heard from a distance.

The sweeping soldiers stopped their hatchets and the guards readied their spears.

“Captain!”

“I know! It came from the south. All hands halt. Get ready for battle immediately! We’re going in for support!”

Except for the guards with their short spears, everyone was holding a hatchet for clearing the path. They definitely could not rush into battle like that.

Therefore they put away the hatchets and picked up the short spears that were ready near by.

As soon as the captain had confirmed that all his soldier had switched gear, he issued a command in a loud voice.

“Okay, time to move out! First we’ll get back to the road and regroup with our Raptorial Dragons on stand-by. Once everyone has mounted, we’ll move south for support at full speed. Got that?”

It was already the fifth time he gave that order.

“Yes!”

The soldiers were still as tense as ever, but routinely shouted their understanding in unison.

“Good. Forward march!”

With these words from the captain as the starting signal, the squad rushed through the thick forest as fast as possible.

* * *

When the whistle resounded, the near squads immediately came rushing in for support.

This time the detachment from the Margrave of Guzzle lead by Xavier Guzzle could hear the whistle as well.

“Hurry up! We are the closest! It is our duty to be there first!”

Riding a Raptorial Dragon, Xavier spurred his men with a voice almost as loud as the whistle, but the urgency in his words was not nearly as imposing as his voice.

After all, it had been the squad under the direct control of General Puyol that had blown the whistle this time.

No matter how small, they had to blow the whistle at an attack from the enemy. General Puyol could not afford to break his own rule, so the whistle was indeed blown, but to be honest, it was unthinkable that his squad would suffer casualties from an attack amidst this thick forest.

That optimistic assumption from Xavier was partly correct and partly wrong.

“Andrés, take care of my dragon. I will walk from here on. Let’s go!”

“Aye, Sir. Leave it to me. Good luck!”

Entrusting his Raptorial Dragon to his light-skinned attendant, Xavier left the road and went into the forest with a spear in hand.

Compared to riding a dragon on the road, he was irritatingly slow by foot through the forest.

The area had been cleared from scrub and vines once, but even so, the protruding roots of the tree meandered through the ground. As a result one could get badly injured from just slipping.

“Please be careful, Milord.”

“I know!”

All of a sudden, Knight Joseph was beside him and cautioned him, to whom Xavier replied spirited without averting his eyes from in front of him.

As his stature was smaller than the average for men in the Carpa Kingdom, Xavier was inherently well suited to run through aggravated terrain.

Knight Joseph on the other hand had admittedly an average height, but firm and broad shoulders. Despite that, he was keeping up with Xavier without getting out of breath. That was definitely owned to his experience.

Before long, they could hear the groaning of dragons, the shouts of humans and the clashing of weapons from the front. It was not far anymore.

“Hah, Hah, Hah.”

Xavier suppressed the urge to rush ahead and kept his breathing steady as he ran. His field of vision was soon filled with the scenery in question.

“GRRR!”

Several Pack Dragons were attacking the detachment from General Puyol in the depth of the forest.

The area was dense with trees, so it was not easy to discern their numbers for sure, but there seemed to be at least more than fourteen Pack Dragons.

The fact that the detachment under the direct control of General Puyol encountered the Pack Dragons, the target of his hunt, first of all showed how “lucky” the general was.

“General Puyol!”

Xavier quickly spotted the back of the general and shouted his name with a loud voice.

Even the famed General Puyol could not prevent the raid of the Pack Dragon in this thick forest.

Soldiers and Dragons were all over the place alike, making the employment of the Archers impossible. If anything, they more or less had not broken ranks even amidst this forest battle, which was actually praiseworthy.

General Puyol himself was holding a round bronze shield and a curved iron sword, fighting in close combat.

“Sir Xavier, eh. Well done.”

The general responded to Xavier behind him while swinging the curved sword in his right hand and beating the Pack Dragon in front of him.

“Just join our ranks. Kill them as they come and do not pursue.”

The words of the general lacked the fervour of a battlefield, not to mention the irregularity from being out of breath.

“Understood! All hands, attack! Stay in groups of three! The whole group is to retreat when one gets injured!”

“Aye!”

Upon the order from Xavier, the soldiers from the Margrave of Guzzle split into groups of three and faced the Pack Dragons as they were told. But because they were trying to not get into the way of the fight of the detachment from General Puyol, many of them had nothing to do.

That was the result from Xavier’s stocktaking of himself.

The thick forest reduced visibility and made formation quite difficult. He was not so conceited to believe that he was capable enough to give accurate instructions in this situation.

Accordingly, he made one defensive shield-bearer, one offensive spear-bearer and one supportive look-out work together just like during training, and let them fight at their own discretion.

To be honest, that tactic was extremely inefficient, but fortunately enough, General Puyol had taken the frontline duty. On a closer examination, there were not really all that much Pack Dragons, either.

Xavier had concluded that a somewhat inefficient tactic would not affect the battle under these circumstances.

“Those at the front only have to worry about defending! The attack will come from the people at the sides!”

He encouraged his men with a loud voice and looked over the poorly visible battlefield.

His armament consisted of a short spear in his right hand. It could be thrusted, but also thrown, if needed.

On account of the place and cluster of people, Xavier stood at the back and watched over the soldiers fighting at the front while he kept his spear ready to throw at any time.

It was unlikely that he could defeat a Pack Dragon with a single strike of a throwing spear, because he did not have the monstrous physical strength of General Puyol, but he could at least give a soldier enough time to collect himself in case he lost his balance and was in danger.

The first one to show such a weakness in front of Xavier was not a less-experienced subordinate of his own, but surprisingly enough, a supposedly elite soldier of General Puyol.

“Agh!?｀”

Having pierced the chest of a Pack Dragon with his short spear, the soldier seemed to have screwed up the removal of his weapon. The writhing dragon overpowered him and because he still had not let go off the pierced spear, he was dragged along and lost balance.

“Guh.”

Despite this, he did not fall and was merely driven to his knees, which was probably owned to his experience.

Xavier assessed that he would not hit an ally by mistake at this distance, but before he could release the spear in his right hand, General Puyol pushed his giant body between the Pack Dragon and the kneeling soldier.

“!?”

In the nick of time, Xavier stopped the throw.

“Wh- What…?”

Breaking out in a cold sweat, he muttered dumbfounded.

Before he was going to throw the spear, he definitely had checked the surroundings. He would even go as far as taking an oath that he only had raised his hand after confirming that no one had been near enough to step in from the side, not even by accident.

Yet, General Puyol had jumped in from outside Xavier’s field of vision in an instant.

Amidst a battle in the thick forest with bad footing and equipped with a leather armour, a shield and a curved sword, at that.

Even in all modesty, his agility was no longer human.

Moreover, he was far from being done with his abnormal feat.

“HISS!”

“Hmp.”

The Pack Dragon snarled and thrusted his long neck out to bite him, but General Puyol hit it from the side with the round bronze shield in his left hand.

“GYA!?”

Of all things, the Pack Dragon lost its balance from that one hit and fell down. The general did not miss that opportunity.

“…”

He quickly stepped on the head of the fallen dragon with his left foot, holding it down with his bodyweight.

“GI, GI!”

Of course the adverse circumstances played a big role, but it was a truly surreal sight that a human oppressed a Pack Dragon with just one foot.

“SSH!”

The finishing blow was a strike with the curved sword in his right hand. General Puyol completely severed the thick neck of the Pack Dragon with a single blow.

Blood gushed out from the severed neck and the dragon perished. The general took his foot down and called out to the soldier behind him, who had finally gotten back on his feet.

“You okay?”

“Yes, Sir. I’m fine. Sorry to have troubled you.”

The face of the soldier bitterly showed a bit of guilt. The detachment under the direct control of General Puyol was essentially the elite “Dragonback Archery Knights”. Naturally, this soldier was a member of it as well and he could not conceal the vexation he felt about himself for allowing a mere Pack Dragon to take him by surprise.

With his back to that young soldier, General Puyol gave him an advice.

“Humans were never meant to fight dragons head-on to begin with. Our physiques and strength are too different. The strong points of dragons are their physique and brute strength, whereas the strong points of humans are skills, weapons and cooperation.

Never try to block an attack from a dragon head-on. Deflect it to the side. And always let go off your weapon if it is stuck.

Unlike the claws and fangs of dragons, we can replace our weapons. If you have no spare weapon, rely on your companions.

Being able to do that is what makes us strong."

"Y-Yes."

The friendly advice from the general did not really seem to move the soldier.

Xavier had listening in from behind and even he could not help but forget the fact that they were on a battlefield and give a wry smile when the young soldier looked obviously perplexed.

(Everything he said is common knowledge and right, of course, but when it is coming from him, it somehow sounds so wrong.)

After all, the Pack Dragon that was supposedly "superior in physique and brute strength" was "felled through brute strength, weighed down by a foot and killed with one strike" in front of them by General Puyol just now.

Even a sound argument that applied to most people lacked credibility when the person, who cited it, was doing the exact opposite of it.

Nevertheless, General Puyol held the title of a general precisely because of his exceptional combat abilities.

"The dragons will retreat. Only use throwing spears and bows from now on."

While swinging the sword in his right hand once to get rid of the blood, General Puyol determined that and in the next

moment, the Pack Dragons turned around and fled into the forest, just like he had said.

It was almost like he did a prophecy or knew the future, but it was nothing that supernatural.

By observing the actions and fighting spirit of the enemy, he had merely conjectured their retreat in advance. Anyone, who called himself a commandant, could do the same, albeit not necessarily that quickly.

But the quickness of that instantaneous decision making could be crucial on the battlefield.

“Hah!”

“There!”

“Take this!”

The soldiers had trusted the words of the general without a shadow of a doubt, so they confidently raised the spears in their hands and as soon as the Pack Dragon turned around and tried to flee, they showered them with throwing spears before they disappeared into the forest.

If the order from the general had come just a moment later, the agile dragons would have escaped before they got the chance to attack.

General Puyol nodded once without saying anything, probably satisfied that his men had attacked the fleeing Pack Dragons with ranged weapons as he told them to, and suddenly turned around to face Xavier.

“Sir Xavier, I saw your men on the left wing advancing. I will take charge here, so go and bring them back.”

“Yes, Sir. Come on, Joseph.”

“Yes. I will cover your back.”

Xavier responded reflexively and went to the left wing together with Knight Joseph like he was told.

Careful not to trip in the forest with its scrub, he could not help but shiver.

(I stood at the back and overlooked everything, but failed to see my men, yet General Puyol noticed it, even though he was fighting at the front. How does he keep track of all that?)

Normally it would not be welcomed that the commandant was fighting at the front himself, but the battlefield did not always allow him to give orders from the back, where he could oversee everything. Even during a chaotic melee battle, a commandant had to be able to grasp the situation of his own troops and give out the absolutely necessary commands, or he was unworthy to be called a commandant.

“Hey, stop going in too far! You are all by yourselves! It is dangerous to pursue any further!”

Xavier caught up with his men and rebuked them from behind while he once again realized that he still had a long way to go towards his goal.

Chapter 03: The Boundary Between Goodwill and Ulterior Motives

Noon of a certain day.

Zenjirou was having his second meeting with Princess Freya in one room of the residence of the Duke of Valentia.

A few days had passed since the initial greeting. His temporary assistant Raffaelo Márguez had already inquired about the concerns of the princess.

Officially speaking, they were having lunch together to cement their friendship, but in reality it was more of an unofficial meeting for a final endorsement.

Of course Zenjirou had no intention to make the efforts of Raffaelo and Princess Freya so far go down the drain, but he did have the authority to annul everything, if he felt like it. Because of that, everyone present was quite nervous in their seats, even if they were showing smiles on their faces.

“I see. Intercontinental travel is far more dangerous than we thought. I applaud your courage and determination to sail that sea, Princess Freya.”

Zenjirou nodded commendatory while using his fork and knife to eat his meal, sliced raw fish with a citric dressing.

Since he had already acknowledged her as a “princess from the North Continent”, he was now using a polite manner of speaking. It was a welcome change to him, because he was more used to it than using a condescending tone.

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty. But I merely did what I wanted to, and in all honesty, that is not really all that

commendable. In fact, my dear father and brother are always criticising me for it."

Spooning the spicy soup with dragon meat that was common in the Carpa Kingdom, Princess Freya responded like that and playfully stuck her tongue out for a bit.

From the point of view of her family, she was a problem child without doubt.

The princess of their country took a ship by herself and travelled to another continent. It was easy to imagine how the royalty of her country tore their hair out.

Having said this, she definitely did not convey that impression when she smiled charmingly in her light blue dress.

"Still, your actions will ultimately bring about a gain for your country. No one will be able to deny that fact."

"Yes, I certainly hope so. When we got into that storm at sea, my heart was in my mouth, but now I do think it was the grace of God that we drifted here."

The northern princess was delighted at the stroke of good fortune in an exaggerated manner, whereas Zenjirou just nodded with his plastic smile.

"Certainly. Both our countries could not wish for a better outcome than establishing trade relations with each other."

The report from Raffaelo had revealed that her home country, the Uppsala Kingdom was in the same position as the Carpa Kingdom regarding intercontinental trade.

Situated in the far north of the North Continent, the Uppsala Kingdom had not conducted any intercontinental trade by themselves so far. Their intercontinental trade was only done

through an intermediary country in the southern part of the North Continent.

And since the Carpa Kingdom, situated in the central part of the South Continent, was doing intercontinental trade through an intermediary country in the northern part of the South Continent, the two countries were practically in same situation, just mirror-inverted.

It would be of incalculable value if the Carpa Kingdom and Uppsala Kingdom were to establish a direct trading relation with each other.

“But an unavoidable obstacle gets in the way of a direct trade between our countries.”

Despite this, Zenjirou dared to point that out with a serious expression, whereupon Princess Freya titled her head a bit puzzled and disagreed.

“You really think so? I personally believe that our countries have the least obstacles as trading partners of all.”

“…..”

“…..”

Zenjirou and Princess Freya paused eating and gazed at each other wordlessly.

The “obstacle” Zenjirou spoke of was different from the “obstacles” Princess Freya was referring to.

Frankly speaking, his envisioned “obstacle” was the distance between the Carpa Kingdom and Uppsala Kingdom.

The North Continent and South Continent in this world were not directly connected like North America and South America

on Earth, nor were they separated by a calm internal sea like the one between Europe and Africa.

A vast ocean that was larger than half of the South Continent itself expanded between the North and South Continent. Moreover, the northern part of the South Continent was a large desert, so the shortest route, meaning from the southernmost part of the North Continent to the northernmost part of the South Continent, was of no use, either.

Due to these circumstances, the rather modest intercontinental commerce was mainly carried on by countries in the south of the North Continent and countries in the north of the South Continent.

The seaway between the south of the North Continent and the north of the South Continent was already dangerous as it is. Its danger would only multiply if they were going to extend that seaway by the range from the Uppsala Kingdom in the north of the North Continent to the Carpa Kingdom in the central area of the South Continent.

It would be crazy to tackle that route unless one had a ship of the calibre of the “Yellow Leaves” from Princess Freya.

“Yes, we certainly will have hardly anything stand in our way as long as we can resolve the simplest, yet most troublesome problems first.”

Zenjirou acceded to Princess Freya, even though he did heave an affected sigh to express that it was not what he had actually meant.

“I am glad you understand.”

The “obstacles” from Princess Freya were referring to trade frictions with neighbouring countries.

For the Carpa Kingdom it would be much shorter to work together with a country in the south of the North Continent instead of going all the way to the Uppsala Kingdom in the north of the North Continent. Likewise, a country in the north of South Continent was a bit shorter to the Uppsala Kingdom than the Carpa Kingdom in the central area of the South Continent.

But needless to say, the countries in the south of the North Continent and North of the South Continent were already carrying on intercontinental trade.

If the Carpa Kingdom or Uppsala Kingdom wanted to participate in that as well now, they would inevitably compete over the pre-existing shares.

And in that case, they would naturally get the short end of the deal, because they were joining in later.

But if they were to pass over these trading countries and establish direct trading relations with each other, they could reduce the troublesome foreign affairs of trade friction to a minimum.

The Carpa Kingdom was a prominent major power on the South Continent and the Uppsala Kingdom was well-known as a technology developed country on the North Continent, too, so they were satisfactory trading partners for each other.

The only problem was, just like Zenjirou had mentioned, whether an actual trade route would be achieved.

“Anyway, we will make sure to repair your ship well. When you make it back home safely, it will more or less prove the fact that a passage between the Carpa Kingdom and Uppsala Kingdom is possible. I hope it goes well.”

“Yes, I cannot thank you enough for your kindness, Your Majesty.”

Upon his assertion, Princess Freya put her spoon on the side and lowered her head a bit.

It had already been decided in the previous negotiations with Raffaelo that the Carpa Kingdom would repair the “Yellow Leaves”.

Of course the shipwrights of the “Yellow Leaves” were going to lead the whole work sequence, but the shipwrights from the Dukedom of Valentia and the County of Márguez would do the manual labour.

It was practically a given already that the Carpa Kingdom would figure out the technology for the huge ship with several masts.

Nevertheless, it would take years of trial and error until they could successfully construct a huge ship by themselves and even then, it would take even more time and money to train a crew that could sail such a huge ship without problems. Still, it did not change the fact that the technology from the North Continent would be leaked to the South Continent.

“It was nothing. In any case, should your cargo really remain stowed on the ship, now that the repair of the ship has been decided?”

After the validation of the repairs for the ship, Zenjirou swallowed the sliced raw fish and then moved on to the next topic.

Incidentally, the “sliced raw fish soaking in citric dressing” was a delicacy in Port Valentia, but not highly regarded by people from out-of-town, so Zenjirou was the only one eating it right now.

Princess Freya kept smiling and straightened her back for a bit upon his question.

“You are right. Leaving the physical transfer of the goods aside for now, it should be alright to go ahead with a transfer on paper.”

“I have heard that you have ‘iron’ and ‘wool fabric’ on board?”

His inquiry was met with a nod from Princess Freya.

“Indeed. But primary ‘wool fabric’. The ‘iron’ is sparse at the rate of the whole cargo.”

Amongst the exports from the North Continent, the wool fabric fetched a rather high price on the South Continent.

Like its name implied, “wool fabric” was a fabric made out of wool from animals. Animals like sheep or goats, which were kept for their wool, were extremely rare on the South Continent, so the wool was a luxury good on the South Continent by necessity.

On the other hand, it was not impossible to obtain iron goods on the South Continent, too, as long as quality did not matter, because the only advantage the North Continent had was its superior technology for it. Considering the permissible maximal weight of the cargo, the wool fabric had the better profit margin.

The memo with the instructions from Aura did say how Zenjirou should handle the cargo and he did discussed it with Raffaelo Márguez beforehand, too.

“We will buy up your whole cargo. If you want to exchange it for sugar or spices, we will give you a better exchange rate than on the market.”

As such, Zenjirou proposed that without hesitation. Raffaelo had already arranged a number in great detail with Princess Freya for the exchange rate and Zenjirou had been informed about the exact number as well.

Just in case, Zenjirou had let Damian, the governor of Valentia, show him the prices for sugar and spices in Port Valentia from the last three years, and the difference had not been all that great.

The rate did seem a bit too favourable, but they wanted Princess Freya to convince her father and brother back home through this deal in order to make the trade route between the Carpa Kingdom and Uppsala Kingdom permanent.

In light of that secondary object, the price was more than warrantable.

Needless to say, Zenjirou considered such a bonus to be one-of-a-kind, since their supply for sugar and spices was limited and they had to compensate the inland demand as well as maintain the intercontinental trade through mediating neighbouring countries.

Completely oblivious to his mindset, the princess from the North Continent showed a soft smile on her snow-white face and bowed briefly so that her short silver-blue hair fluttered.

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty. Then I would like to get silver coins for a tenth part of our cargo. The rest will be exchanged for said rate.

Of course I will take the sugar and spices, but if possible, I hope you can provide some dragon leather and bones as well.”

“Hmm, dragon leather and bones, you say?”

Although he already knew about it, Zenjirou looked slightly bewildered about her statement.

Even Raffaelo had been puzzled when she had brought it up during the previous negotiations.

On the South Continent, the dragon leather and bones were used for a lot of things, starting with armour, but there had been a bizarrely low demand for them on the intercontinental market so far.

Only Princess Freya wanted them as bad as the people from the South Continent.

What was the difference between her and everyone else on the North Continent? Raffaelo had suggested that they should not make an explicit promise as long as they did not know the answer to that question, and Zenjirou had agreed to it.

“They never sold well as goods for export, so I am afraid that we currently do not have the amount and quality you seek at hand.”

“Is that so. That is a real pity.”

Princess Freya did not dwell on it any further either and withdrew her request by only saying that.

“…..”

“…..”

For a while, only the faint clinking of the silverware could be heard. Lady Octavia had done her best so that Zenjirou learned the vital necessity about royal etiquette, but he still lacked the composure to fully savour his food in such a situation.

“By the way, Princess Freya, how do you like the food here? I hope it suits your taste.”

Zenjirou decided that it would be bad to stay silent as the host, so he broached an harmless food topic.

Princess Freya answered adequately

“Yes. Everything is a new experience for me and very delicious.”

while she skilfully fillet the spice fried meat with her knife and fork.

Her answer was not a lie.

Still, even the best cooking could not suit the taste of everyone. In fact, Zenjirou was eating the raw fish delicacy from Port Valentia with relish, but Princess Freya and her company had not touched it at all.

Even if the food posed no problem so far, she would start to miss the cooking of her home country when she had to eat the food here for a long time. It belonged to human nature.

“Do you not miss the cooking of your home country? I dare to say that the food here is completely different from the North Continent.”

When Zenjirou asked that, Princess Freya slightly shrugged her white shoulders that peeked out from her light-blue dress.

“I appreciate your consideration, but I am fine. Our ships carries goats and chicken, and we have our own cooks onboard, too. If needed, they can more or less recreate some dishes from our home country. Vegetables are out of the question, though.”

The ship held goats and chicken.

Hearing about that for the first time, Zenjirou reacted surprised.

“You have goats and chicken on board? I mean, living ones?”

Princess Freya was a bit surprised at first when he showed surprise and expectation, but then she seemed to understand and said declaratory with a smile.

“Yes, they are alive, of course. I am afraid, though, that these goats cannot be sheared for wool. The species we take along to the South Continent has poor growth of hair and is unsuited for wool fabrics.”

This was the first time the Uppsala Kingdom had sent a ship directly to the South Continent, so she only knew about it from hearsay, but a lot of people on the South Continent seemingly wanted to get their hands on living goats.

If they managed to breed them in their countries, they could produce wool fabrics by themselves. It was only natural to hit on that idea.

But like Princess Freya had said just now, it was not that easy.

Goats were originally living in cold highlands, but they had the strongest ability to adapt to their environment amongst herbivores and were not even picky about their food.

In principle, the kind of goats that were raised in cold highlands tended to have a luxuriant crop of hair.

The goats they crammed into the ship and took along to the South Continent were from a species, whose fur was practically worthless.

But Zenjirou was not taken aback by that explanation.

“I do not mind. The milk is what I am after.”

He had heard that the milk from goats tasted and smelled different from the milk of cows, but it should be good enough as a replacement. Instead of the milk itself, he had the milk products he could make from it in mind.

In the old days, he had seen a mail order company sell butter made from goat milk on the internet, so it should be possible to make milk products from goat milk.

Having said this, Zenjirou did not actually know how to do it, so he would have to rely on Princess Freya again for that knowledge.

But contrary to his delight, the princess looked somewhat wary for a moment.

“Your Majesty, do you mean to drink the goat milk?”

Confronted with that question, Zenjirou had the creeping horrors, because he thought that his desire had been irresponsibly, but it was too late to take back his words. Fortunately enough, this was only an unofficial meeting for lunch.

He decided to brave it out as his “personal liking” and answered while he tried to look as unaffected as possible.

“Yes. Could it be that it is not common to drink the milk from goats in your country?”

“Not at all. It is an important source for nutrients and all the commoners ingest it. Naturally it will be drunken as it is, but milk products like butter, cheese or filmjölk are essential for the winter as preserved food.”

For the people of the Uppsala Kingdom it was only natural to consume goat milk. Princess Freya had been surprised, because Zenjirou, an inhabitant from the South Continent, had said it.

The South Continent had no mammal livestock, so its people did not have the chance to consume the milk from mammals, much less any milk products made from it. Due to that, they

even had developed a strong aversion to consuming the milk from animals.

In addition to it, the majority of people even repudiated the meat of goats with claims like “it stinks” or “not to my liking”.

Because of that, Princess Freya had concluded that the “goats with unusable fur” were worthless on the South Continent, but it seemed that she had been wrong.

(This reminds me of his background…)

She recalled the rumour she had heard about his origin a couple of days before and suddenly thought of one possible explanation.

(I should probe into it a bit more.)

Without so much as batting an eye about her plans, the princess of the north continued with a smile.

“Livestock is a lifeline for seafarers, but if you insist, I am not averse to relinquish a few to Your Majesty.”

“Thank you! I know it is a impudent request, but I would be glad when you could spare enough males and females alike, so that they can be mated here, if at all possible.”

“I believe that can be arranged. We do have enough specimens of both.”

The goats that were chosen as livestock for the long voyage had a relatively small physique, no fastidiously diet and a good adaptive capacity for their environment.

Their weakness on the other hand was a short lifespan. Normally a short lifespan and hence faster growth would be more of an advantage for livestock, but it made it somewhat troublesome for livestock in milk.

In this world, a goat became fertile half a year after its birth at the earliest or one year after its birth at the latest.

It was also the timeframe for ablactation and meant that the dam stopped producing milk after half a year.

Long sea voyages could sometimes even take a year or more. If they were to put only females on board for their milk, the goats would stop producing milk after half a year.

To prevent that from happening, they took along some males for procreation, too, and periodically let them breed. The newborn kid was raised into a next dam or breeding goat if the situation allowed for it, or alas, killed for its meat if the situation did not allow for it.

“I am glad to hear that. Then please allow me to buy them in a private matter. I will compensate you sufficiently for sure.”

Fortunately enough, Zenjirou had priorly received a budget at his own disposal from Aura in order to buy something for himself that might catch his eye.

Modest as always, he had refused it as soon as he had seen it, saying he only needed enough to buy the souvenirs for Aura and the two royalty guests at home, but Aura had more or less forced it onto him.

In retrospect, accepting the budget had been the right thing to do, so Zenjirou heaved a sigh of relief at heart.

“With pleasure, Your Majesty. If you are going to breed them, then relatively young specimen will be the best choice.”

Although they were only talking about animals, their conversation contained graphic words such as “mating” or “breeding”, but despite her petite appearance, Princess Freya

was not averse to the topic and showed no signs of disgust or shame. She kept remarking unconcerned with a smile.

(Oh, shit. What the hell am I discussing with a princess during lunch.)

Zenjirou realized that the conversation gradually slipped into a territory unsuited for a lady, so he cleared his throat with an affected cough and tried to come up with a way to change the topic nonchalantly, but before he could think of anything, Princess Freya continued happily.

“Nicolai was the most passionate about reproduction on our ship, but it certainly would be a bad idea to hand him over…”

“M- Milady…!”

No longer able to stand by and watch, the female soldier sitting next to her, raised a small voice and interrupted her master, well-aware that she was being rude. By the way, “Nicolai” was not the name of a goat. He was a young crew member of the “Yellow Leaves”.

Now even Princess Freya realized what unladylike things she had uttered. Her cheeks turned red and she ducked her head embarrassed.

“Oh my, how clumsy of me. Please forget what I said.”

Lucky under the circumstances, the problematic of her utterance was not understood, because no one but Princess Freya and her female bodyguard knew about the true identify of “Nicolai”.

Not sure about what was going on, Zenjirou still sensed that it was better not to inquire any further, so he pretended that the earlier statement did not happen and carried on.

“I cannot make any grand promises to you, since this is a personal request, so I would like to pay for the livestock with silver coins. I am aware that it is a bit crude. Please do tell if you are taking issue with it.”

“Not at all. I would agree to sugar or spices as well, though.”

Princess Freya easily picked the new topic up, but Zenjirou had to shake his head with a smile.

“I am afraid that these goods are exceeding my power. Her Majesty Aura has only put silver coins at my disposal, so I can only pay with them.”

After that he noted resolutely like that.

“Oh, you do not say.”

Still smiling, Princess Freya simply left his statement hang in the air with her response, but the female soldier sitting next to her darted an obvious scornful look at him for a second.

Well, that was more than understandable. Right now, Zenjirou had practically admitted that he could do nothing without the permission from his wife and could only spent as much as the allowance she gave him.

Coming from the husband of the Queen and male royalty with a bloodline magic, it truly was a pathetic statement.

But even though the female soldier regarded him as hopeless, her master at her side continued to make conversation with a smile.

“Speaking of Her Majesty Aura, I have heard that you two have a child?”

“Yes. The moppet is a real blessing.”

“Oh my. My congratulations! Did he have his first birthday yet?”

“No, not yet. It has not even been half a year since he was born into the world.”

“In that case, allow me to present you the goats as a belated celebration of his birth. In our country it is a custom to give away livestock when a child is born. Right, Skathi?”

“Yes, you are right.”

Suddenly drawn into the conversation, the female soldier was a bit surprised, but still affirmed the words of her master without a hitch.

And in fact, it was common practice in the Uppsala Kingdom to give away livestock in celebration, just like Princess Freya had said. Having said this, goats were given as presents by wealthy commoners. Royalty more likely gave away a riding horse or destrier.

Anyway, it would be rude now to reject it, since it was a “celebration gift”.

“Thank you. I will make sure to bring your courtesy to Her Majesty Aura’s notice.”

When Zenjirou said this with a smile, Princess Freya brightened her smile a bit and replied.

“It was nothing. If anything, I regret to have nothing better at hand. Normally, I would have given you a precious sword forged by a blacksmith of our country.

Do you happen to have a preferred weapon, Your Majesty?”

Zenjirou answered the somewhat delicate question with a wry smile.

“No. As shameful as it is, I am not really a fighter. I have no experience with any weapon.”

He did not really feel shameful about not being able to fight, since he was still clinging to the moral values of modern Japan, but in this world, the majority of young men from nobility or royalty had received a military training.

The atmosphere was about to turn awkward for a moment, but Princess Freya spoke on before that happened.

“Is that so. Pardon my asking.

Anyway, did you know that surprisingly many soldiers in our country have a partiality for knitting? Many of them are fishers on the side, but there are a lot of days during the winter, where the ships cannot set sail, so they inevitably engage in things they can do at home as a hobby.”

Speaking of, it was the custom in the Uppsala Kingdom to maintain your own armour, so the soldiers were mending leather armours or chain mails by themselves. That experience also made them proficient in dealing with sewing and knitting needles. Surprising for sure, but a fact nevertheless.

“I see. That sounds interesting. I take it that the ships are unable to set sail in winter, because the harbours are frozen over?”

Zenjirou noticed that Princess Freya wanted to gloss over her slip of tongue, so he gladly reacted to the new subject. It certainly was interesting, when he imagined how a tall and bulky svenskar soldier was neatly knitting at home, just like the knitting bear he had seen in a picture book as a child.

“No. Thankfully the harbours do not freeze over. So the trade ships commute as always even during the winter, but it does

not change the fact that it is extremely cold. Because of that no one goes out fishing in winter unless the sea is really calm."

In a situation, where the ambient temperature was twenty degrees below freezing point and even the sea water had a temperature below zero, the sea spray and breeze alone could be lethal already. Not to mention that it would be difficult to work with all the layers of clothing against the cold. And if someone were to fall into the sea by accident, he would probably die from a shock before actually drowning.

"I guess you have such reliable soldiers, because they can withstand these harsh forces of nature."

"Thank you very much. It has been brought to my attention that the Carpa Kingdom has plenty of brave soldiers as well. And that they have performed splendidly in the previous war."

"Certainly. I was not here yet during that time, so I only know about it from hearsay, too, but they are truly valiant soldiers."

"The adversities of that war could even be perceived all the way in the north of our continent. I have heard that many people lost their villages and that death wrenched the parents from many children.

I wish I could do something for them."

"Thank you for your sentiment. But all these displaced people and orphans are still precious subjects of our country. The Carpa Kingdom aka Her Majesty Aura will assume full responsibility for them, so please rest assured."

Both Princess Freya and Zenjirou kept smiling and elegantly ate their lunch while they chatted happily.

"I see. Please forgive my impertinent remark."

“Not at all. I am really touched by your empathy. Still, Her Majesty has decreed that the country will take full care of every subject without exception and nothing will change that decision. Please do understand.”

“Yes, of course. I am awed by the great passion of Her Majesty Aura.”

And then, an harmonious atmosphere filled the room until the end of the lunch.

* * *

After the lunch meeting, Princess Freya immediately went into the bath as soon as the returned to the guest house, and took a cold bath.

She still regretted a bit that she had to cut short the silver-blue hair she had been so proud of for the position as the captain, but after a bath like this, she realized how much of a blessing the short hair actually was.

Ever since she had moved into the guest house, she had started to refresh herself in the bath three times a day. If she still had the long hair till her waist, it would have not been so easy to take a bath.

With an absorbing cotton cloth wrapped around her hair, Princess Freya sat down on the couch in her room.

She just wore a plain one-piece dress with no sleeves over her underwear and left her feet shoeless.

Her rough outfit and relaxation were only tolerated, because she was alone in the room with her trusted retainer, the female

soldier. Princess Freya spread her legs as much as good manners allowed her to and heaved a deep sigh.

“This country really feels like a sauna. Now I understand why they walk around barefooted or with cloth sandals indoors.”

“Some water, Milady.”

“Thanks, Skathi.”

She emptied the silver goblet with water given to her by the female soldier in one gulp. It was not really lady-like how she gulped down the drink by throwing back her head, but she could not resist the appeal of the just scooped cold water from the underground well.

“Fuh…”

Now that she had taken a cold bath and cooled off her body from the inside as well by drinking some cold water, the Princess from the North Continent breathed a long sigh as though she felt relieved at last.

“For the time being, the repairs of our ship and the basis for trading have been provided.”

“Yes, congratulations, Milady.”

When the princess started to talk about the meeting at dinner, the female soldier sat down on the couch across from her.

The female soldier— Skathi was a bodyguard for Princess Freya, but at the same time her trusted retainer. When no one else was around, they could sit down across each other and talk at eye level like this.

Having said this, their statuses were too different, so even if they sat together like this, it was to inappropriate say that they were on an equal footing.

“I have heard stories about it, but I must admit that I never thought that the intercontinental trade would be so rigorous profitable. Going by that exchange rate, it would still be worthwhile even if only one of three ships returns.”

“Sugar and spices are luxury goods on the North Continent after all, and so are wool fabrics on the South Continent.”

Buying cheap and selling dear were the basics of commerce, but the difference between the buying and selling price in intercontinental trade was exceptional. Of course the prices would drop before long once a trade route had been established and the demand was satisfied in time, but there was plenty of time until that happened.

Princess Freya crossed her legs as she sat on the couch in her short one-piece dress.

“It is practically a given that they will get their hands on the technology of our huge sailing ship now, but there is nothing we can do about it. And I would have liked to get some dragon leather and bones to strengthen our military, but they politely brushed me off after all.”

“Indeed. Who would have thought that the damn influence of the ‘Church’ was reaching this far. It has nothing to do with our country, though.”

The female soldier frowned, whereupon Princess Freya showed a wry smile.

“That makes no difference to the people on the South Continent. I could have cleared up the misunderstanding through explaining it in detail, but it is a topic I would rather not spread around.”

The “Church” was a wide-spread religious organisation on the North Continent and they worshipped the ancient dragons that were said to have lived in this world long ago.

The doctrine of the “Church” said that the current dragons were the descendants of the ancient dragons and thus divine beings. Due to that, very few soldiers in countries under the influence of the Church got permission from them to wield weapons or armours made from dragon leather and bones.

Moreover, the Church identified the people on the South Continent as the “descendants of banished sinners that had evoked the anger of the grand ancient dragons” and forbade that the advanced technology of the North Continent was taught to them.

Either way, it was without any reason, but for some reason, it was a rather popular belief on the North Continent, to the point that the Church had even more authority than the king in some countries.

But the homeland of Princess Freya, the Uppsala Kingdom was an exception. The influence of the “Church” was extremely small there. Accordingly, there was no opposition to importing dragon leather and bones on a large scale, but the people of the South Continent did not know about that fine distinction. Because of that, all the countries under the influence of the “Church” as well as the Uppsala Kingdom were lumped together as “countries of the North Continent”, even though the Uppsala Kingdom worshipped the spirits.

“Yes, it would certainly take a long time and negotiations to make them understand our situation.”

“And then the question is whether the dragon materials are worth all that. The good news is that we have some time until

our ship is repaired, so I will try to speak with His Majesty Zenjirou in the meantime."

The reasoning of the princess took the tall female soldier by surprise and she looked baffled.

"His Majesty Zenjirou? Not Sir Raffaelo?"

She must have expected the question from her trusted retainer. Princess Freya smiled a bit and rectified her error with a meaningful tone.

"Yes, His Majesty Zenjirou. Skathi, do you actually believe that he is 'only a figurehead'?"

Looking at the suggestive smile of her master, it was already obvious that she was not regarding him as such, but there was no need to mince words now, because they were all alone.

"Yes, I do. I believe he is merely a figurehead with royal blood and the title of husband of the Queen. At the very least, he did not appear clever or ambitious to me."

The female soldier declared bluntly.

In the back of her mind floated the smile from Zenjirou when he had unashamedly admitted that he could not fight. According to her values, there was no bigger flaw than that.

Receiving the answer she had expected, Princess Freya slowly shook her head.

"You are wrong. His Majesty Zenjirou is definitely no ordinary man. And by that I do not mean that he is a 'man of great calibre', but rather that he literally is not 'ordinary', for better or worse."

"What do you mean?"

The female soldier knew all too well that the princess looked like a quiet girl, but in reality, she really liked to put on airs, so Skathi asked without losing her composure.

“The origin of His Majesty Zenjirou is not a normal one. I am sure you have heard the rumour as well, namely that he does not hail from the Carpa Kingdom.”

“Yes. If I remember correctly, Her Majesty Aura has summoned him from a faraway place with her bloodline magic.”

Looking at the ceiling, the female soldier recalled the rumour to mind and answered.

In general, it was not really known that Zenjirou came from “another world”. They were not hiding that fact deliberately, but it would be difficult to explain the concept of “parallel universes” to the uneducated masses of the Carpa Kingdom.

Due to that, Zenjirou was more or less perceived as a “man that had been summoned with magic from a place so faraway that it could not be reached within a lifetime”.

“Indeed. I also dismissed it as a fraud at first, but it seems to be the plain truth.

He certainly comes from a country with a different culture than the South Continent. The best proof for it is his desire for goats in order to drink their milk.”

“I see. That makes sense.”

The explanation from Princess Freya seemed to have convinced Skathi now, seeing as she agreed.

Once you reached a certain age, your bias for food became permanent and did not change anymore.

The livestock on the South Continent consisted of dragons, meaning large reptiles, without exception. Because of that, the people on the South Continent were not used to ingest the milk of livestock. Needless to say, that applied to dairy products as well.

But Zenjirou had curiously jumped at the information of “living goats”, so it was highly likely that he grew up in a culture, where milk and diary products were consumed favourably.

“And I have more proof. Do you remember the conversation about his child? I asked him whether his child had its first birthday yet, and he cheerfully replied that it was yet to come because it had not even been half a year since his birth.”

“Ah!”

When Princess Freya pointed that out, Skathi was completely taken by surprise now and exclaimed flustered.

“That certainly is strange. Everyone on the South Continent is supposed to count the year of birth, too.”

“In addition to it, no one here should know about the number ‘zero’. However, His Majesty was of the opinion that he was not one-year old yet, because not even half a year had passed so far.”

“So he is at least counting the years of age more like on the North Continent than on the South Continent. And maybe even the calendar years.”

On the South Continent, the year of birth was generally added to the age. You were one-year old at birth and with every year that passed, you added one more year to it.

Therefore it was fundamentally impossible that “your first birthday was yet to come”.

Princess Freya placed a hand against her chin and mused.

“We cannot rule that out. He really might have been raised in the North. Do you remember how he spoke about our harbours freezing over as if it goes without saying?”

In the Carpa Kingdom it was practically summer all year long, but there were some really tall mountains inland, so the concept of “snow” and “ice” was not unknown to them. Still, it only applied to mountains high enough to get altitude illness, and the idea of “harbours freezing over” was not something a person from the Carpa Kingdom would ever think of. Even in the southern part of the North Continent, many people did not know that harbours could freeze over.

“I see. I did not pay it any mind, because the conversation with His Majesty went so smoothly, but now that you are mentioning it, his knowledge and education certainly seem strange. At the very least, I do admit now that he is not an average man.”

Even while the female soldier said that, the look in her eyes did not indicate that she was viewing him in an altogether different light now. Apparently not even a little bit of education improved the evaluation of a man that was neither brave, nor ambitious.

The princess cracked a smile, because she knew how her trusted retainer felt, and added a remark.

“Of course there is more. His Majesty Zenjirou is definitely the most important figure during these negotiations. He has the final say in everything after all.”

But the female soldier only tilted her head with a puzzled look on these words.

“That I do know, but that is nothing more than a formality, is it not? In the earlier meeting he merely acknowledged what you have negotiated with Sir Raffaelo priory. The deal with the livestock may be an exception, but not even that did strike me as all that clever.”

Strictly speaking, Skathi made a reasonable claim, but Princess Freya did not agree with her regardless.

“Yes, I do admit that His Majesty does not seem to have a remarkable wit.

Nevertheless, he fully caught on the content of our preceding negotiations. He has a good apprehension and judgement as well as the authority to have the final say, so we have to take account of him the most.”

In reality, neither the evaluation from Skathi, nor the one from Princess Freya were entirely accurate in regards to Zenjirou. But at the same time, they were both scratching the surface of the truth.

Just like Princess Freya had said, Zenjirou did have the authority to make a final decision in regards to this matter. But by the same token, his authority was probably just a formality and unless something went horribly wrong, he would affix his “signature” to the document in the end, just like Skathi had said.

Zenjirou himself had decided to be the “spokesman for Queen Aura”. His words were the words of Aura. His will was the will of Aura.

He would fulfil his role just as his wife expected him to. But he would avoid taking the credit for himself and did his utmost, so that others would not regard him as competent.

That approach of his was abnormal on the South Continent as well as on the North Continent. Of course Princess Freya and Skathi could not understand it, since they had only met with him a couple of times yet.

Still, Princess Freya deduced a few things from their meeting at lunch.

“His Majesty inherently has a fine judgment. I say this, because he accepted my offer when I declined his payment for the livestock and made it a present instead.

He does seem to have gotten the permission from Her Majesty Aura to spend a certain amount of money at his own disposal, but it is a different matter to ‘receive a present’ from guests from another country like us. I assume that they were not expecting something like that to happen.

Nevertheless, he immediately accepted my offer like it was nothing. I believe he did that after estimating the advantages and disadvantages of accepting or declining such a ‘present’.”

“…I would say he simply leapt at it the opportunity, because you said you would give him something he wanted for free.”

Princess Frey did not deny the still doubtful words of her trusted retainer.

“Of course that is a possibility as well. But I think it is safer to overestimate an enemy or negotiation partner instead of underestimating him.”

It would be best to estimate your counterpart accurately without over- or underestimating him, but that was a very difficult thing to do. Thus, Princess Freya generally preferred to overrate her opposite until she was certain of his competence.

“Very well. To be honest, I do think that is overdoing things, but we cannot be careful enough in our position after all.”

The female soldier consented for now with these words.

When you overestimated your opponent, you did not have to worry about being outwitted, but in exchange, you might not have a shot at a good opportunity, because you were not taking risks. Still, Princess Freya and her group were in a situation, where their ship, the only way to get home, could not be repaired without the help of the other party.

If they were too greedy, they might end up in a desperate plight, unable to go anywhere.

Princess Freya then wiped the smile off her face, narrowed her eyes to slits and cleared her throat.

“Besides, he properly delivered a blow to me as well. In light of his repartee, I am certain that His Majesty is anything but a mere figurehead.”

Saying that, she recalled the “chitchat” they had at the end.

During that chitchat, the princess had implied that the Uppsala Kingdom was ready to take in the war orphans or displaced people from the previous great war, but Zenjirou had quickly discerned her motive and declined it as plain as it can be.

“If we could have managed to bring some people of the South Continent with their favourable amount of magical power back home, we would have been able to ease up the declining average amount of magical power in our country to some extent.”

Princess Freya heaved a regretful sigh from the bottom of her heart.

The Uppsala Kingdom faced various problems of importance, but one of them was the declining average amount of magical power of their citizens.

A lot of theories tried to explain the reason for it, but Princess Freya was of the opinion that it was be attributed to the shift of opinion from the people that magic was less important now that their technology had progressed.

The amount of magical power was inherited just like height or looks. That was a common fact on the South Continent as well as on the North Continent.

For that reason, magicians were in great demand on the South Continent and all doors were open to excellent magicians. There marriage was already worthwhile when each partner had an high amount of magical power.

On the other hand, the North Continent had developed technology instead and magicians were in little demand, so people generally did not take the amount of magical power of the partners into consideration when marrying.

Commoners had valued character and reliability, soldiers had valued courage and physique and royalty had valued pedigree and sociality rather than the amount of magical power for marriages over decades. As a result, their average amount of magical power was greatly lagging behind the one on the South Continent, where the amount of magical power was prioritized. Or at least that was the opinion of Princess Freya.

She had no evidence to back it up, but she believed that she was getting close to the truth.

“In view of his reaction, they will surely sever all ties with us already if we were to try to take some of their people back home. What a shame.”

Princess Freya recalled how Zenjirou had professed that Queen Aura would not forgive anyone, who took away a subject of hers, and breathed another sigh.

It was most unfortunate. On the bright side, they had packed enough food for the long journey to cope with the home trip, even without their livestock, as a matter of prudence.

They could leave all the livestock on the ship behind if it meant that they could get their hands on the ultimate resource in the shape of people from the South Continent.

And if they were to return with the cargo area loaded with as much people as possible instead of the livestock, the voyage would have been more than profitable from just that. Then Princess Freya would surely get praised by even her father and brother, who had been reluctant to let her go.

“Truly a shame.”

She grumbled still regretfully precisely because she firmly believed in that.

* * *

Around the same time, Zenjirou was having a meeting with his temporary assistant Raffaelo Márguez in the office of the residence of the Duke of Valentia after lunch.

It was tiring to have another meeting without rest right after the strenuous discussion with Princess Freya, but the earlier lunch had officially been his midday break, so his schedule did not appear all that packed on the paper.

There were three people in the office: Zenjirou, Raffaelo and Ines the maid.

The Carpa Kingdom was admittedly hot, but now that the hottest season of the year had passed, the temperatures no longer surpassed the body temperature. Along with the bright sunlight, the refreshing sea breeze blew in through the opened windows and somewhat cooled the face and neck of Zenjirou dressed in his formal attire.

He sipped the cold tea Ines had poured and slowly began to speak.

“Now the contract with Princess Freya is as good as cut and dried. Are there any problems right now?”

Raffaelo immediately answered his question with a soft smile as always.

“No, none at all. Owing to your efforts, the proceedings will be a lot easier from now on. Thank you very much.”

When Raffaelo bowed politely, Zenjirou heaved a sigh of relief at heart while he replied to him without changing his facial expression.

“I see. That means the ship of the princess can be repaired without problems?”

If they could not do that, all their plans would go down the drain. That applied to their main objective of learning the blueprints for the huge sailing ship as well as the future prospect of joining the intercontinental trade.

So when Zenjirou erred on the side of caution, Raffaelo replied confidently.

“Everything is okay. The shipwrights of the ‘Yellow Leaves’ have already briefly discussed the matter with our shipwrights.

They said it will be possible to repair the ship in the docks of Valentia. It will most likely hazard three regular repair docks, though."

That should be no problem. In the end, neither Zenjirou, nor Raffaelo were knowledgeable about ships. They had no choice but to believe the words of the shipwrights, if they gave their okay, because they were experts on that field.

"Would you like to take a look at the ship before the repairs start?"

Although Zenjirou was aware of his lack of that knowledge, he could not bring himself to decline the suggestion from Raffaelo right away, because he did have quite an interest in the huge sailing ship.

It was a wooden ship that had sailed between continents. Of course it was intriguing.

"Wouldn't it disturb the workflow if I were to show up there?"

This opinion arose from the awareness of his own position.

When an important figure like the Prince Consort showed up without warning, it surely would be a huge bother for all the persons concerned.

But Raffaelo dismissed his concern with a smile and shake of his head.

"No, that will not be a problem. They only just have finished the preliminary discussion and are still examining the ship before beginning with the repairs. There is no specific work going on around the ship for now.

The shipwrights will be at the dock for sure, but as long as you do not interrupt them, the schedule will not be affected."

In view of their level of civilization, the Carpa Kingdom attached relatively much importance to rationality. Zenjirou was not aware of it, but the workers in the Carpa Kingdom were allowed to prioritize their work as long as they were not directly called upon, even if Royalty paid them a visit.

Zenjirou could no longer suppress his curiosity when he received that explanation.

“Okay. Then I’ll go take a look. Find me a day, where the least work is going on.”

“Yes, very well.”

It somehow seemed to Zenjirou that Raffaelo was giving him a slightly patronizing look, but that was probably only his delusion.

Either way, there was no point in worrying about such trivia. Zenjirou immediately shook off the thought and moved on to the next topic.

“I guess the ‘furnace’ negotiation was no good?”

The instruction note from Aura had not listed the blueprints for the “furnace” as a must, but as desirable if feasible.

Aura was currently concentrating the efforts on the glass manufacture, so the know-how for a “furnace” that could withstand high temperatures would be of incredible value.

It was a well-known fact that the North Continent had an overall better technology than the South Continent. Moreover, the Uppsala Kingdom was the brand leader for iron production on the North Continent, if the words of Princess Freya could be trusted.

In that case, they should have more advanced furnaces than the Carpa Kingdom, too.

However, Raffaelo Márguez heaved a small sigh with regret and shook his head.

“Sadly, yes. To begin with, the ‘Yellow Leaves’ only has some people onboard that can repair weapons or make arrows at best. They did not bring a genuine blacksmith along.

Besides, even if they had one, he would surely specialize in forging iron goods instead of smelting iron ore or building a smelting furnace.”

In all objectivity, that goes without saying. The more advanced technology got, the more subdivisions emerged.

Amongst the thousands of craftsmen, some eager foremen coordinated the construction of the furnace themselves, smelted the ore under their watch and forged the tools with their own hands, but needless to say, they were so rare that they could be called a national treasure.

At the very least, no one like that would be aboard the “Yellow Leaves”. And even if they did establish a trading route with the Uppsala Kingdom in the future, it probably would still be out of the question that one of them crossed over to the Carpa Kingdom.

“In the future, when the intercontinental trade is initiated, there is a chance that it can be achieved, but for now, please consider it impossible.”

Raffaelo said resolutely in a calm tone.

“I see.”

It was unfortunate, but Zenjirou had not expected much, so he was not really let down, and accepted the point of view from Raffaelo.

“Then put the negotiations for the furnace on hold for now. It’s not a question of a day or two anyway. I’ll personally consult with Her Majesty Aura later and come to a decision.”

“Yes, very well.”

When Raffaelo responded briskly, Zenjirou looked at him and thought to himself.

(Man, he really is competent. So much that it strikes me that I’m the competent one here, even though I’m just using him. That’s a bit scary.)

After all, he easily produced results in a short time when you ordered him with stuff like “negotiate about this and that” or “find out about this and that”.

Having said this, not all the negotiations could go well, nor could every information be obtained.

But in such a case, Raffaelo always provided an accurate forecast, such as “the other party has no intention to cave in any further” or “I am afraid that they will realize what we are up to when I probe into it any further“, and asked for further instructions.

Thanks to that, Zenjirou was provided with a couple of simple choices along with accurate predictions for each choice.

The only thing he had to do was to pick the choice that complied to Aura ‘s wishes the most.

This certainly was not something as extravagant as diplomatic negotiations. It was more like an adventure game with a hint function.

(He doesn’t look like it, but he got the negotiation skills, keen wit and fine judgement. The problem is, he lacks

determination. No, not quite. It's more like he's desperately trying not to take responsibility?)

Zenjirou evaluated the high-ranking nobility standing before him like that at heart.

An "extremely capable civil officer", if you will.

He did his given work to perfection, but did not act on his own unless he was told so from his superiors. And he always made sure that someone else would shoulder the ultimate responsibility.

"Anything else? No? Then immediately report to me when something unforeseen happens. I personally will get in touch with Her Majesty in the Capital for further instructions."

Zenjirou emphasised that, but it was more or less a lie. Unless something really drastic occurred, he actually did not need further instructions from Aura.

They had prepared carefully in the Capital beforehand and Zenjirou was capable of making prompt decisions on his own for anything that was written on his memo.

But it would cause a lot of trouble if people were to "misunderstand" that Zenjirou was a man of sane judgement and had the authority to make such calls, so he pressed the point to the public that he had to consult with Aura in the Capital.

"Yes… As you wish."

Whether he knew about these secret circumstances between the Queen and the Prince Consort or not, Raffaelo was still smiling softly and politely bowed once.

Intermission 2: Tracks on the Ground, but no Dragon in Sight

Fighting for the safety on the Salt Road, the Royal Army lead by General Puyol and the troops from the March of Guzzle lead by Xavier Guzzle were continuing their hunt triumphantly thanks to the great effort of all the soldiers.

Based on the advice from the hunters, they had identified a small mountain as the home base of the giant Pack Dragon, so they had surrounded it in a semi-circle ensuing from the road and were gradually tightening the encirclement.

Needless to say, it was not as easy as it sounded. Once they left the road, there was nothing but uncharted territory.

The serried trees would not allow you to take ten steps in the same direction and the breast-high scrub scraped even the tiniest bit of exposed skin. The climbing plants hanging between the trees were sturdier than they looked and blocked your path, whereas a considerable amount of the insects hiding in the shrubs had stings toxic to humans.

Due to that, the soldiers were wearing a stifling outfit that consisted of a long-legged trouser, a long-sleeved shirt, ankle-high leather boots and work gloves of a sort, while they silently swung their machetes.

It goes without saying that it was hot in the Carpa Kingdom. Mercifully the hottest season had already passed, but the maximum temperature still climbed above thirty degrees during noon for sure. Under these conditions, even the

experienced career soldiers got tired, when they had to swing a machete non-stop for hours while wearing this cloaking outfit that only revealed the face.

Cutting grass required you to crouch all the time and the exhaustion from that was only known to those, who had actually done it before themselves. In addition, these clothes kept all the sweat inside. After one hour, the sweat-drenched clothes already became heavier many times over than what they had been before.

Maybe all that sweat made the skin itchy, seeing as the soldiers not carrying a machete were scratching their bodies all over at all times, but it was not really crowned with success when they did so with gloves over thick clothes.

Normally, the best approach would be to sing a song in the process to ensure that this kind of plain work ran smoothly. The song would give the work a rhythm and make them forget about the physical exhaustion from the mindless task to some extent.

Unfortunately however, they were forbidden to raise a loud voice here, not to mention singing. After all, they were not here for “weeding”, but for “hunting”.

They actually needed to get rid of the Pack Dragons, not the weeds. If they were to sing together with loud voices, they would fail to hear an attack from the Pack Dragons or other hostile dragons in time.

Thus, most of the soldiers could only grumble in a hushed tone to relieve stress while they got covered in sweat, mud and plant sap.

It then happened, when they had advanced halfway through the initial schedule thanks to that messy effort from the soldiers.

“What? Say that again.”

The leader of the Pack Dragon Subjugation Party, General Puyol glared at the trembling hunter, who had a beard and a pale face, and said this.

“Hii…!”

The general did not mean any harm, but he was still intimidating for the other party.

After all, General Puyol was a renowned general that almost everyone in the Carpa Kingdom knew about, the current head of a prominent noble family and a giant steeled warrior that was nearly two metre tall and weighted over a hundred kilo.

He had the authority as well as the ability to kill you on the spot, if he felt like it. It did not make you a “coward” for giving a shriek when being glared at by someone like that. If anything, it was a normal reaction.

Fortunately enough, General Puyol was not so dense that he could not interpret the expression of his opposite.

“Hm…”

Looking down on the bearded hunter trembling like he had the ague, the giant general inadvertently showed his annoyance by knitting his brows, but he realized that such an expression would only worsen the situation, so he somehow kept up a blank expression. And then,

“Sir Xavier! This man is one of your men, right? Listen to what he has to say and report back to me.”

He addressed the young nobleman standing at attention behind him.

In a way, it amounted to a surrender from him. He had discerned that no matter what he did, it was impossible for him to calm down the shaking man in front of him.

No surprise. A deer or rabbit would never let their guard down around a lion, no matter how friendly the lion might act or smile.

“Yes, very well.”

Xavier Guzzle had completely become attuned to playing the subordinate of the general nowadays, so he quickly responded.

Afterwards, General Puyol heard the report of the bearded hunter passed on by Xavier Guzzle inside a temporary tent.

The interior was rather narrow, because they only had levelled a clearing they had found on the way by chance with the “Earth Manipulation Magic” and set up a tent with the “Earth Wall Magic”.

It was already filled to the brim with just four people: General Puyol, his second-in-command, Xavier Guzzle and Knight Joseph. Having said this, General Puyol actually occupied space for two.

“Speak up, Sir Xavier. Did you get the information from that man?”

Sitting on an improvised chair created with Earth Magic, General Puyol said this, whereupon Xavier Guzzle stood upright at attention und answered.

“Yes, he managed to calm down and told me everything.”

Although the huge-grown general was sitting and the short successor to the Marquis was standing upright, they were sadly still more or less at eye level.

General Puyol replied with a rare wry smile to his words.

“Sorry about that. I’m sure you already know, but I tend to frighten people. In the past, I tried to change for the better, but I have given up by now.”

His facial features were finely chiselled enough to call him handsome, but his expression was that of a warrior first and last without a shred of laxness.

Thus, the act of “easing the wary of others” was one of the very few things he could not do.

Xavier was hard pressed for an answer when he heard a lamentation from the Hero for the first time.

“Ah, no, well, everyone has a weakness…”

General Puyol realized that his grumbling had unsettled the promising youth, so he continued as if his previous statement had not happened.

“Well then, let me hear your report. What was that man going to say?”

Upon his question, Xavier corrected his posture and started to talk with a stern expression.

“According to him, it is quite likely that the Pack Dragons are no longer in this area.”

The bearded hunter was an experienced huntsman Xavier had brought along from his domain. He was an expert that knew more about the habits of wild animals, starting with the Pack Dragons, than anyone else here.

General Puyol was not so stupid to take the words of this expert lightly.

“Hmm, how shall I put it? An expected turn of events? Or an unexpected turn of events?”

He mumbled that, because he also had sensed that something had been wrong with the current situation, even as a non-specialist.

When they had started the hunt, they had encountered the Pack Dragons rather frequently, but these encounters had practically stopped as of late.

That was strange, when you gave it some thought. The more the hunt advanced, the smaller the perimeter got. If the pack lead by the Huge Pack Dragon was still inside that perimeter, it would make no sense that the encounters became rarer. If anything, it should become easier to encounter them.

Xavier continued his explanation.

“Based on the slain preys, feces, claw marks and tracks we found from the Pack Dragons so far, we can be certain that a few hundred of them lived on this mountain. And because some of these marks and tracks have been larger than normal, we can also assume that the ‘Huge Pack Dragon’ was hiding around here.

However, we are encountering the dragons lesser times, even though we are diminishing the perimeter. Or more precisely, no one has even seen a glimpse of a Pack Dragon in the past

three days. Thus, my subordinate said that it is quite likely that the pack has already fled the mountain."

Even beasts would flee, when backed into a corner. That was only natural.

Despite knowing this, they had chosen a "semicircle" encirclement that left open an escape route. The reason being that a full circle would have been practically impracticable for one, but also because the bearded hunter in question had assured them that a semicircle would be sufficient.

If the hunter were here now, General Puyol would have given him a glare so fierce that it could have caused an heart attack.

"What's the meaning of this? I was told that there are very few territories that provide enough food and shelter for a large pack of Pack Dragons. And because of that, they never abandon that territory, unless they absolutely have to. Was that misinformation?"

That had been the main reason behind his approval for the semicircle.

It goes without saying, but all kind of animals were fighting a fierce battle over territories within the thick forest that was uncharted to humans.

Hunting grounds, watering holes and a safe nest to brood eggs. All the places with these conditions fulfilled were already occupied by powerful dragons without doubt.

Hunting in groups, the Pack Dragons were certainly a powerful species amongst dragons, but they were not at the very top of the food chain.

They were relatively many enemies the Pack Dragons could not beat in a normal fight, such as Adamantine Dragons, Greater Dragons or Fang Dragons.

Thus, Pack Dragons usually did not abandon their territories and chose to fight until the end, even when they were hunted by humans, because they knew that it did not necessarily guarantee their survival when they retreated deeper into the forest.

Interrogated sharply by the general, Xavier looked obviously nervous when he swallowed his saliva, and somehow managed to reply without his voice cracking.

“Well, he says that Pack Dragons do sometimes abandon their hunting grounds as well as watering holes to escape, although it happens very rarely. When an opponent they absolutely have no chance against, such as Emperor Dragons or Brute Dragons, invades their territory, they do not fight a losing battle, but rather bet on the faint hope of settling in a different territory with the whole pack.”

Even General Puyol raised an eyebrow surprised in reaction to this explanation.

“In other words, you are saying there are large carnivore dragons on par with Emperor Dragons around here?”

If that was the case, they were in big trouble. A crisis one level above the Pack Dragon subjugation. But Xavier stopped that suspicion with a shake of his head.

“No. The hunter claims that this is out of the question. Going by the feces, slain prey, claw marks and tracks we found so far, the Pack Dragons are the only carnivore dragons in this area.”

“Hmm…”

General Puyol put his hand against his chin and mused.

Pack Dragons rarely abandoned their territory, but in reality, they had done exactly that. The known exceptions of Pack Dragons abandoning their territory, were cases when an unconquerable foe, like Emperor Dragons or Brute Dragons, invaded their territory.

However, there were no signs of other carnivore dragons besides the Pack Dragons in this area.

All the necessary information had been collected. General Puyol reached the right conclusion in no time.

“Basically, that Huge Pack Dragon has identified our troops as an ‘unconquerable foe’ and escaped.”

When the general said this, Xavier nodded with a serious facial expression.

“Indeed. My subordinate said he could not be sure of it, but no other explanation is conceivable.”

At the beginning, the Pack Dragons had hunted the humans, but then they were confronted with a painful counter offensive, so they abandoned their hunting grounds and escaped.

Put into words like that, it really did sound like the typical behaviour of animals, but it was not the primal pattern of behaviour for Pack Dragons. As the loser of the battle, they could not help but do so, though.

“That dragon has good judgement and a fast execution. If it were one of my subordinates, I would give him full marks.”

An enemy that knew when to cut losses and withdraw, was really troublesome.

Agreeing with the evaluation from General Puyol, Xavier went on with the explanation.

“Either way, it will be safe to say that the Pack Dragons have left the territory, when we do not encounter them anymore until the end of our hunt here.

And then, I believe we may call our mission finished for now.”

“Certainly. Our mission was not to eliminate the dragons, but to restore the safety of the Salt Road, so we can call our mission a success, when the Pack Dragons no longer appear on the Road.

However, will that really be alright? It will be no laughing matter, when the Pack Dragons come back once we have left.”

The hunter seemed to have already given his opinion about that concern of the general, too, so Xavier responded without hesitation.

“Yes. That certainly is a worry. But there is an even graver problem: An intrusion of a territory as we did it, causes the whole forest to fall into ‘disorder’.”

“Into disorder?”

“Yes. A fight over territory sometimes does not end between just the inhabitants and the invaders. Of course all will be well, when the party on the losing side perishes, but when they do not and escape instead, they will cause another fight over territory elsewhere. If the losing party does not perish there either, it will go away and start yet another fight over territory… That cycle can go on for who knows how long.”

“That’s beyond our means, though.”

General Puyol shrugged his broad shoulders wearily this time.

First of all, he could not withdraw his troops as long as there was still the smallest chance of the Pack Dragons returning.

But at the same time, there was the possibility that the escaped Pack Dragons caused the fight over territory to spread over the thick forest. The Queen definitely had to be informed about that.

It would pose no problem, when the fight concluded within the forest itself. But it would turn into a big deal if the fights over territory caused by the expelled dragons from the Salt Road drew near another human settlement by chance.

Xavier had mentioned just now that their mission was done with the “restoration of the safety on the Salt Road”. That perception was by no means wrong.

But General Puyol was an important general of the army and considered himself a backbone of the country, so he knew that he was not attending to his duty, when he finished the mission in name only.

The famed general wracked his brain, came to a quick decision and began to speak while he intensified his already sharp eye.

“We will finish the hunt here first. I don’t doubt the words of the expert, but we’re better safe than sorry under these circumstances.

Also, Sir Xavier.”

“Yes, Sir?”

“You will go to the Capital with the hunter. Your standing should allow him to meet with Her Majesty Aura directly. Report the circumstances and ask for further instructions.”

Although Xavier was clever for his age, he could not help but be confused about the unexpected order.

“Yes. B- But I am to go to the Capital itself? If it is only a report, it would be faster to send a ‘Small Flying Dragon’ from the fortress. Besides, leaving my own troops would…”

“A Small Flying Dragon won’t do. The situation is too complex. A written report is inflexible and could cause a misunderstanding. Same goes for by word of mouth. The hunter absolutely has to report directly to Her Majesty. She is tolerant when it comes to things like that.

In the meantime, your troops will be lead by Sir Joseph.”

Xavier realized that it was already a done deal on the basis of his tone, so he checked with Knight Joseph standing next to him through a brief eye-contact. Then he stood to attention and bowed.

“Understood, Sir. I will head to the Capital as soon as the hunt is over.”

When Xavier declared that, General Puyol shook his head

“No, you’ll depart immediately. There’s no time to lose.

Once the hunt is over, we, too, will head back to the fortress at the border of the royal domain and I’ll send a ‘Small Flying Dragon’ from there. Considering the speed of Raptorial Dragons and Small Flying Dragons, the ‘Small Flying Dragon’ should still arrive at the Capital a little bit before you. Of course I’ll mention your coming in the letter. If you should arrive before the Small Flying Dragon, act accordingly on your own.”

and defined the order more precisely.

There was no time to lose. Xavier understood that it was not meant as a metaphor, and bowed once more with a stern expression.

“Yes, very well. I will leave at once!”

As if to substantiate his words, he then rushed out of the tent.

Chapter 04: The Path of the Vicious Circle

“Wow. This is quite impressive…”

On this day, Zenjirou went to the harbour for the first time, since his arrival in Valentia, and exclaimed in awe when he looked at the large sailing ship with four masts.

The name of the harbouring large ship was “Yellow Leaves”. Although it was called a large sailing ship, it merely conformed to the standards of this world. In reality, it was only half as large as the ferry Zenjirou had boarded during his field trip in elementary school. Still, it definitely had an overwhelming appearance with its four imposing long masts.

From the hold to the deck, everything was made out of wood. You would think they had prioritized utility when they built it, but it actually combined utility with beauty and fascinated anyone, who looked at it.

His enunciation must have let on his admiration for it.

“Yes. Please take a good look, Your Majesty. This is the pride of our country, the state-of-the-art ship ‘Yellow Leaves’.”

Princess Freya, standing next to him, threw out her chest and bragged about her ship without concealing the proud smile on her face.

The sea breeze carried over a sense of chill, but it was still pretty warm, because the immediate sunlight and the reflection from the white stones were quite strong. Despite that, Princess Freya showed no signs of being affected by that heat right now.

“It is quite striking. Does it have fore-and-aft sails and square sails by twos?

“In normal circumstances, yes. But the advantage of the ‘Yellow Leaves’ is that the sails can be exchanged in a relatively short time, even on sea, if necessary.”

Keeping their eyes on the “Yellow Leaves”, Zenjirou and Princess Freya conversed with each other.

“Then it is possible to have four fore-and-aft sails for when there is a headwind and four square sails for a tailwind?”

“Exactly. Although it is possible to change the sails on sea, it does require time and manpower. And above all, the work carries a great risk, so two sails of each kind usually stay in place, unless you are absolutely sure that the wind direction will not change any time soon.”

“I see.”

At this point, Zenjirou finally took his eyes off the ship and looked at Princess Freya standing next to him.

“By the way, I see that you are dressed like this again today. I guess it is because you are near the ship?”

Right now, she was dressed as a “man” like she had when they met for the first time.

Her outfit consisted of trousers for men, a fancy white shirt with a wide collar, a long jacket worn over it and a thick leather belt. The only difference to before was that there was a small curved sword hanging down from that belt now.

Although she did was dressed like a man, it merely applied to her choice of clothes. The clothes in question did by no means conceal her womanly curves and on a closer look, you could see

that she was wearing make-up, too. The “cross-dressing” was as half-baked as before.

Previously, Zenjirou had missed the chance to ask why she was wearing such clothes and now, Princess Freya seemed to read that question in his eyes, because she answered with a smile.

“Truth be told, my country has the custom to consider a ship as female. Because the ’captain’ is practically the partner for the ship, only males are allowed into that position.

Due to that, a married male captain has to divorce his wife only for the sake of form before setting sail, and a female captain always has to wear men’s clothing like myself, when approaching the ship.”

“Now I understand. That is quite the strange custom. Oh, please do not misunderstand. I did not mean to make fun of your country.”

Zenjirou realized that his words could be interpreted as though he was ridiculing the deep-rooted rite of another country as superstition, so he quickly added an explanation as soon as he had uttered it.

Princess Freya chuckled a bit, probably amused by his panicked attitude.

“No offence taken. In fact, I, too, know that it is nothing but superstition. There are a lot of sailors‘ superstitions, but as they say: old habits die hard.”

“Yes, you are right. And sometimes you are better off keeping them up, if the crew believes it. Otherwise they might make mistakes they usually do not commit, because of uneasiness.”

His remark prompted the princess to nod extensively as if to say that he had a point.

“Indeed. Sometimes the captain is the most superstitious of them. While the men go out to the stews at the port of arrival, the captain stays all alone in her cabin and has to comfort…”

“M- MILADY!?”

Caught up in the moment, Princess Freya was about to say something unseemly for a lady again, but the tall female soldier standing behind her intervened with a pale face.

Even as her trusted retainer, she broke the rules by disrupting a conversation between royalty, but she must have concluded that the harm would be even greater if she let her master finish that sentence.

In reality, it had already been too late, but the well-mannered Zenjirou pretended to have not heard it.

Princess Freya also blushed all too late.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty. The long time on sea has worn me out. I would be grateful if you could forget what I just said.”

Zenjirou cast a glance at the crew of the “Yellow Leaves” standing behind Princess Freya and was convinced at heart.

The men standing there were all sturdily built, befitting the description “sea roughneck”.

Most of them were taller than Skathi, who was already exceptional tall for a woman. The colours of their hair and eyes were light, as it was common for people from the northern part of the North Continent, but all of them had their skin tanned blackish-brown. Their hair was not really tidy either and their beards were left to themselves, too. All that, coupled with their clear-cut eyes that were more hollow than those of the people

from the South Continent, gave the men a vigorous appearance that practically spelled “bad guy”.

She had spent over a hundred and twenty days with these rough guys on the same ship, so it was no surprise that even an elegant princess would somewhat be affected by them and pick up some vulgar knowledge.

(In her case, though, I would say she never really was the ‘sheltered lady’ to begin with.)

Zenjirou recalled the conversation he had with her during lunch before. At that time, she had been the perfect negotiator. Unlike himself, who left all preliminary negotiations to Raffaelo and merely picked simplified options, Princess Freya had done all the negotiations by herself.

That was not something a normal princess under twenty years old could accomplish.

Just as Zenjirou reminded himself of that at heart, it happened.

DONG, DONG, DONG. The loud and shrill sound of a bell penetrated his ears as it resounded all over Valentia.

Oblivious to the exact meaning of the bell, Zenjirou still realized at once that this uproar marked an “unexpected happening”.

“Damian! What’s that sound!?”

Startled by the sound as a reflex, he turned around to the man most knowledgeable about this city, Governor Damian, and asked him.

The middle-aged noble stepped forward at once when the Prince Consort called out to him, and said with a slightly pale expression.

“Yes, that bell is signalizing an ‘attack’. It is coming from the east, so something must have happened in the mountain rather than the sea.”

Valentia was a seaport in the western part of the South Continent. The sea was to the west, but in the east there was a mountain, or more precisely an elevated thick forest. When the bell was rung from that side, some kind of emergency must have happened on the mountain.

“In the mountain?”

This incident completely came out of the blue. Still, Zenjirou did not hesitate to make a quick decision at a time like this, even if there was not much he could actually do.

“I’m going back to the residence. Damian, you are in charge. Raffaelo, you are my liaison to Damian, but if he needs your help, your report to me can wait. Either way, attach enough guards to the residence.”

In other words, he was saying that he was going to hide in the residence, so they are to take care of things and protect him with all their might.

It was a pretty blunt statement, but Zenjirou was aware of the fact that he would only cause trouble, when he butted into the situation with his upper-class title and amateurish knowledge. The best he could do was not to get in the way of the others.

In fact, Governor Damian looked obviously relieved, when he heard the declaration from Zenjirou.

“Very well. I will excuse myself then.”

Leaving these words behind, the governor quickly went away.

“I will accompany you, Sir Damian. I will be going, too, Master Zenjirou.”

Thereupon even Raffaelo wiped the usual calm smile off his face and followed after the governor of Valentia with a stern expression.

“…..”

Left behind, Zenjirou watched the two men going away with swift steps for a while and then faced Princess Freya.

“As you can see, we are in a state of emergency. I will be returning to the residence. Please accompany me.”

“Yes, I understand.”

Princess Freya answered him with a composed voice.

* * *

At evening of the same day.

In one room in the residence of the Duke of Valentia, Zenjirou finally heard a report about the incident from Raffaelo Márguez.

“Please pardon my delay, Master Zenjirou.”

“It’s okay. I did tell you that the report can wait. The situation seems more or less to be under control, so brief me on the matter.”

Even though he straightened his back on his chair to assume an air of importance as much as possible, Zenjirou had long reached the end of his patience inwardly.

He had withdrawn into the room at the farthest end of the residence, like his guards had recommended, but he still had been able to hear the outside ruckus.

Voices had shouted “Say what!?” or “That can’t be!?” and scraps of conversations had sounded like “We are moving the injured!” or “How many died?”. Only an idiot would have failed to realize that something dangerous had attacked the city of Valentia.

To reinforce that impression: The guards had exchanged their usual handy “self-defence weapons” such as curved swords or short spears for full-fledged “battle weapons” such as bows and long spears while they stood sentinel in the garden.

To be honest, Zenjirou already considered it a great achievement that he did not press the panic button and screamed like a little girl.

Anyway, Zenjirou swallowed once and listened to the long-awaited report from Raffaelo.

The fact alone that the always smiling Raffaelo had put on a solemn face now, displayed how grave the situation must be.

“To make a long story short: The reason for this ruckus are ‘Pack Dragons’ that appeared in the farming land of Valentia.”

As expected, the report from Raffaelo really did not bode well.

Valentia was a supplier of salt, an important fishing port and the biggest trade port in the Carpa Kingdom. Needless to say, an enormous number of people was thus living there. And it needed enough food to feed all these mouths.

Consequently, there were numerous farms in the vicinity of Valentia.

One of these farms had now been attached by “Pack Dragons”.

“The collateral damage?”

“Devastating. So far we have already confirmed twenty-one dead people. Almost the entire livestock, mainly the small Meat

Dragons, was wipe out and nearly half of all the working animals, namely the Hulking Dragons, were killed as well. The farm in question can no longer sustain itself."

The human causalities were grievous, of course, but in a way, it was more shocking that the entire livestock had been wiped out. A farm could not function without livestock. At this rate, even the surviving farmers would die from hunger and poverty.

This world had no laws that secured citizens a remuneration for when they suffered losses through natural disasters. It depended on the decision of the Lord of the Domain, if there would be any help in such cases. In this particular case, it applied to either Aura, the Duchess of Valentia, or Sir Damian, the governor.

(Hmm? Could it be that I have that power right now?)

Zenjirou remembered his position as the fully authorized representative for the Duchess of Valentia and considered his idea for a moment, but discarded it shortly afterwards.

The current situation had not calmed down enough yet to already speak of compensations for the victims.

"What about our counter-attack? You had the time to report to me, so I guess the matter has quieten down a bit, but from what I heard, I doubt the situation has been resolved already."

Raffaelo agreed with him.

"Yes. Frankly speaking, our counter-attack has not made it in time. The soldiers rushed to the scene by command of Sir Damian, but they could only get a glimpse of the already retreating Pack Dragons in the distant. They pursued them until the edge of the forest, but it was not enough to engage them."

In other words, the Pack Dragons had hidden in the forest after their attack on the farm. Meaning that nothing had been resolved yet.

“I see…”

“…..”

The room fell silent for a while as Zenjirou mused.

Before long, he asked in a verifying tone.

“Raffaelo.”

“Yes?”

“Have you heard about the trouble on the ‘Salt Road’?”

“Yes. Marquis Guzzle had brought it up. I have heard that his son Sir Xavier was in charge at first, but General Puyol was dispatched with his army later on.

And then General Puyol had deemed that he had not enough soldiers for the task and requested further reinforcements from Her Majesty Aura.”

Apparently Raffaelo Márguez knew as much as Zenjirou about the matter. Zenjirou questioned him further.

“It seems a pack of Pack Dragons lead by an unprecedented huge Pack Dragon was responsible for the interruption on the Salt Road.

Do you think it’s related to our incident?”

“I believe that there are too many parallelisms to dismiss it as a coincidence. Pack Dragons blocked the Salt Road. And Pack Dragons appeared here, too. Furthermore, I was told that packs with over twenty-four or thirty-four dragons are extremely rare. The norm seems to be around fourteen dragons. Despite

this, we have a witness that says the attack this time was staged by almost a hundred Pack Dragons at once."

"A whole hundred?"

"Yes. Well, it was the testimony from a farmer fleeing for his life and with no military education, so it is not all that credible. But considering that all of the survivors mentioned an 'extreme large number of dragons' or 'overwhelming pack", I think it is safe to assume that there were at least more than twenty-four of them."

Counting the exact numbers on a glance could be considered a proper special skill and was not something a common farmer was able to do while he was running for his life.

And although the testimony of one or two people might not be all that meaningful, it was self-evident to proceed on the assumption that it had been a considerable number of dragons, when the majority of the surviving farmers attested so.

"The pack from the Salt Road apparently had a considerable size as well. Instead of assuming that two different packs of such a size appeared in two different places at the same time, I believe it is more likely that the pack from the Salt Road came over here.

Still, the 'Salt Road' connects the Capital with the March of Guzzle and Valentia is pretty far away from it.

Even on a straight course, they would need to cross over two or three mountains. If you ask me, I really doubt that they would undertake such a far journey."

Raffaelo honestly answered the question from Zenjirou like that.

On the “Salt Road”, General Puyol and Xavier had already taken measures to report that “the Pack Dragons had retreated deeper into the forest as a result of their hunt and that all dragons in the forest might now be fighting a large strife over territories”, but that information had not reached the Capital yet.

Needless to say, Zenjirou and the others in Valentia had no clue about it, either. This world obviously had no internet or telephone lines, but it did not even have a proper post system.

Before the great war, the Carpa Kingdom did have an information network effectively superior to the ones of modern science, namely an emergency network consisting of numerous practitioners of the “Teleport” magic, but unfortunately, Queen Aura was currently the only one left that could use the “Teleport” magic.

“Okay. For now, I’ll send Her Majesty a ‘Small Flying Dragon’. The Capital might know more than we do, and even if not, we absolutely have to report the situation anyway.”

“Yes, certainly. Still, the situation calls for a quick decision. I am afraid it would be dangerous to wait for an answer from Her Majesty Aura.”

Raffaelo made a valid point, when he spoke outright on a rare occasion. With every passing minute, the situation continued to change. Even if Aura was intelligent, there was a time lag until the information reached the Capital, so she could not give out accurate orders.

Zenjirou understood what Raffaelo was getting at and agreed with him while he hid his nervousness behind an inexpressive mask.

“Right. It’s probably better when we act on our own decisions and only exchange information with Her Majesty in the Capital.

At the present time, I am the person ultimately in charge of both civil and military matters here in Valentia. Am I right in assuming that?"

"Yes, that is correct. Normally, Sir Damian would have the authority to command the troops of Valentia as its governor, but right now, you temporarily have taken over the full authority as the representative of the Duchess of Valentia."

To be honest, Zenjirou had asked that question in the hope that it would be denied, but Raffaelo affirmed it readily.

Sir Damian occupied the position of a "governor", whereas Zenjirou currently was appointed as a "fully authorized representative". These two posts were worlds apart.

The "governor" only took over a portion of the authority from the Duchess of Valentia, the original lord, and acted at the behest of her. On the other hand, the "fully authorized representative" temporarily assumed all the authority, like the name implied.

Put simply: As the legitimate Duchess of Valentia, Queen Aura could immediately overrule an order issued by the "governor", if she was against it, but that was impossible when it was issued by the "fully authorized representative".

The reason being that Aura temporarily lost her authority as the Duchess of Valentia, when she appointed a "fully authorized representative". So if she wanted to stop an action from the "fully authorized representative", she first needed to strip Zenjirou of that title.

It was a bit complicated, but the current jurisdiction was like this: Aura, the Duchess of Valentia, had temporarily conferred all the authority of the Duchess upon Zenjirou, who in turn was appointing Sir Damian as the governor of Valentia.

In other words, Governor Damian was a direct subordinate of Zenjirou.

Zenjirou pondered while fighting the stomach caused by the responsibilities.

(Normally, I would just call Sir Damian, let him handle everything and be done with it. But the problem is that Princess Freya is here right now.)

Princess Freya and her group would soon get to know that Pack Dragons were causing a ruckus near by. And then she would obviously request that her people were allowed to wear weapons.

Although the people from the North Continent did not know much about dragons, they would naturally get wary, when they heard that Pack Dragons were on the rampage.

It was pretty unlikely that she would obediently put up with it, when they told her that they would take care of it and she should sit back and do nothing.

Nevertheless, Zenjirou could not allow a foreign delegation to arm itself in Valentia so easily.

Since Princess Freya was acknowledged as royalty, her guards had been allowed to carry weapons for “self-defence”, but permitting full-fledged equipment for “battle” was a different matter altogether.

(The easiest solution for their armament would be to have them cooperate in the ’Pack Dragon Subjugation’. It would give them a legitimate reason to carry weapons. But from her point of view, it would be putting the cart before the horse, if all her guards are send to the frontlines…)

Having thought of a compromise for now, Zenjirou checked with his temporary assistant, who stood at attention before him.

“Raffaelo.”

“Yes?”

“I’m pretty sure that Princess Freya has already heard about this incident, too. So it’s quite likely that her guards will request to be allowed to arm themselves in order to protect their master.”

“Yes, I believe so as well.”

Once he had gotten the consent from Raffaelo, Zenjirou continued.

“But from our point of view, we cannot allow a foreign group to arm itself within a royal domain, even if they are from a friendly nation. It would require a valid reason to allow that.”

“Certainly.”

“Let me be frank, Raffaelo: Would it cause trouble to allow the guards of Princess Freya to participate in the Pack Dragon Subjugation?”

The sharp-witted Raffaelo easily figured out what Zenjirou was getting at.

“To be perfectly honest, yes, it would cause immense troubles. The warriors of the North Continent are admittedly sturdy, but they do not have any experience fighting dragons.

Besides, even if they had that experience, their fighting style is far to different from ours. They use different weapons, different formations and different codewords. I am afraid that

the soldiers on the battlefield would rather have them on the opposing side than having them fight alongside us."

Even if he turned him down like this, Raffaelo then proposed the compromise Zenjirou wanted to hear.

"Still, we can keep the inconveniences to a minimum, when we let them take care of a whole area by themselves, instead of incorporating them into our troops by hook or by crook. Of course we will have to assign some 'guides', because they do not know their way around here."

Needless to say, these "guides" would also "keep an eye" on them.

These conditions were more or less presentational to them. Zenjirou had been quite worried that their soldiers would get constricted for political reasons, so he spoke with an obvious relief.

"I see. That sounds practicable. Raffaelo, I know you're busy, but report the current situation to Princess Freya, too.

Afterwards I'll go and officially ask her for her 'cooperation' in the matter."

"Understood. I will arrange everything accordingly."

Raffaelo politely bowed in response to the order from Zenjirou.

* * *

Late at night of the same day. In the same room, where he had listened to Raffaelo at evening, Zenjirou was now meeting with Princess Freya.

In order to invite a lady over at night, the room was bristling with silver candle sticks on which numerous candles flickered.

Ever since he arrived in Valentia more than one month ago, Zenjirou had been separated from his life with electronic appliances in the Inner Palace, so it was his first “bright night” after a long time. He had bought the crank-powered LED flashlight with him to Valentia just in case, but it had poor coverage, even if its light was bright. The white light was perfect to illuminate a spot around your hands or feet, but was unsuited to brighten up a whole room.

Compared to it, the light from a candle flickering on a candle stick was a rather weak source of light, but there were numerous of them set up around the place, where Zenjirou sat, so the whole room was bathed in a faint glow.

Amidst that glow, Zenjirou looked at the girl in a blue dress sitting mannerly across him on the couch, and opened his mouth.

“I am sure Raffaelo already told you about it, but we are currently facing an unforeseen event.”

“Yes. He explained that a pack of medium-sized dragons called ‘Pack Dragons’ has attacked.”

Princess Freya was not shaken at the unexpected happening and answered with a calm facial expression. For a girl, who was forced to take shelter without knowing what was going on after she had heard an alarm bell in a foreign land, she was a bit too calm, actually.

Well, she did sail off on a voyage of unknown length and no guarantee for survival. It would be foolish to compare her courage to the one of a normal girl.

“Are there no Pack Dragons on the North Continent?”

In order to stimulate the conversation, Zenjirou inserted some small talk, whereupon the girl with short silver-blue hair adopted at once.

“None at all. There are very few dragon species on the North Continent to begin with. And the few we have are all large species and live deep in the mountains, where humans hardly ever set foot in, so the majority of our people has not seen a dragon, besides the Sea Dragon.”

Speaking of, the Church, which was worshipping the Ancient Dragons as gods, claimed the land, where these dragons were living, as “Sacred Ground”, so it was difficult for people to go there.

Having said this, Princess Freya had no intention to explain these complicated circumstances, so she omitted the troublesome part in her story.

“Is that so. Anyway, Valentia will be under emergency rule for a while, because of these circumstances.

I know this will cause some inconveniences to you, but I ask for your understanding.”

Princess Freya had already heard the details from Raffaelo and understood the reason for adjustments. She was not so stupid to be selfish now.

“I certainly understand. If there is anything I can help you with, please do tell me. I may not be able to do much, but you can be assured of my support.”

Considering how smoothly she offered her help, she obviously must have prepared that answer in advance.

Zenjirou, too, answered somewhat contrived.

“I am glad to hear that. There is nothing more reassuring than having your courageous seafaring men as support.

Then I would like to take you up on your offer and borrow about half of your soldiers. I am ashamed to admit this, but under the current circumstances, we are in need of every talented soldiers we can get, on the frontlines.”

“Yes, that will be quite alright. Nevertheless, they are not legendary warriors immune to fatigue, so I would like to replace the group with the other half of my soldiers in due time. Will that be alright with you?”

“Why, of course. Your foresightedness deeply impresses me.”

The Prince Consort and Princess smiled at each other, happily sealing the deal.

These conditions had been proposed by Zenjirou through Raffaelo and Princess Freya had accepted them.

Half of her guards would be sent to the frontlines. The remaining half of her soldiers would continue to guard the princess, but they were supposed to “relieve the other half” on the frontlines, so they would already wear their full-fledged “battle equipment” during the guard duty.

Needless to say, the benefit for Princess Freya was that the guards on “stand-by duty” were allowed to wear their full equipment.

On the other hand, Zenjirou did not need to be in fear of his life, because his remaining guards in the residence of the Duke of Valentia could easily oppress even the heavily armed guards of the princess, if necessary, since their numbers had been halved. Likewise, they had an excuse to allow soldiers of a non-allied nation to fully arm themselves in the royal domain, when they assigned them as reserves for the Pack Dragon Subjugation.

Not to mention that it really did help them that Princess Freya dispatched her soldiers.

The destroyed farm was not the only farm outside the walls of Valentia.

In order to protect all the farms that were widespread around the walls, they needed as many soldiers as possible. That desire was by no means insincere.

Having reached a conclusion, Princess Freya looked at the female warrior standing at attention behind her and gave her simple instructions.

“You heard it, Skathi. Divide our soldiers into two groups at once. You will lead one group and choose the leader for the other group.”

The order seemed to take the female warrior by surprise for a bit.

The tall woman widened her eyes

“Milady, I—”

and wanted to say something, but Princess Freya cut in without letting her finish.

“No worries. I will be a good girl here, so you go and show them what you are made of.”

From the tone of her master, she discerned that the order would not be retracted.

“…Very well.”

The female soldier pulled herself together and obediently accepted the mission.

* * *

In spite of what Princess Freya had said to her, the guards were going to be sent to the frontlines in two groups, so for today, Skathi still kept her duty as the bodyguard of Princess Freya and stayed in the same room in the residence of the Duke of Valentia as her master in order to protect her at night, together with her beloved spear.

Princess Freya sat on the bed, dressed in a relatively comfortable one-piece dress that did not impede her movements, whereas Skathi was on the couch with one knee up, still dressed in her leather armour and holding the short spear with a tusk of a Sea Elephant in her arms.

Both of them were dressed in a way that they could leave at any moment in an emergency. Apparently they intended to sleep in that outfit until the situation was resolved.

Normally, they would already be asleep at this time, but the flame of the oil pan on the table still flickered reddish.

The faint glow of the flame revealed the princess relaxing on her bed and gave her silver-blue hair a slightly reddish tinge.

Her appearance as she breathed regularly on the bed with only a soft one-piece dress covering her body, showcased a fairytale-like beauty.

But the words leaving the mouth of that fairytale beauty were down-to-earth to the core.

“Skathi, what kind of wild card do you think I can expect, when you perform well in the upcoming dragon hunt?”

Of course she was counting her chickens before they hatched, but that kind of anticipation was actually a given in her position.

It could happen that you missed the right chance to play the joker, when you only started to think about it once it fell into your hands.

Asked by her master like that, the female warrior squeezed her spear

“Hmm, I can only speculate, but I would say that you can ask for ‘advanced’ negotiations, when we defeat the boss of the Pack Dragons, for example.”

and replied in a calm tone.

“Advanced negotiations, you say? You mean I might be able to take my objective to the ‘Capital’?”

“Yes.”

When Princess Freya checked with her, the female warrior affirmed it curtly with a flat voice.

In the negotiations so far, Freya had more or less figured out that Zenjirou or rather Aura, the mastermind behind him, wanted to close the negotiations in Valentia and monopolize the external relations to the royal family.

As a fellow royalty, Princess Freya understood where Aura was coming from, of course, and she would have done the same in her position. However, from her point of view, she preferred to strike a deal with the lords from all over the Carpa Kingdom, instead of just the royal family.

She would be able to beat down the price, when there was a competition between numerous suppliers, and some feudal

lords of the Carpa Kingdom might be able to get their hands on products that the royal family had trouble obtaining.

In order to negotiate such goods directly with the feudal lords without mediation from the royal family, she really wanted to get into the Royal Palace in the Capital.

“Well, establishing the trade route is my first priority for now. If I am too greedy, I might lose out on everything in the end.”

“Yes. His Majesty Zenjirou struck me as a sensible person, who will repay good will with good will. I believe it would be wise not to get onto his bad side.”

The northern princess widened her eyes, when her trusted retainer evaluated Zenjirou different than before, and asked surprised.

“Oh my? He seems to have really risen in your esteem? What changed your mind?”

The question from her master had a somewhat teasing undertone, but the female soldier nodded affirmative without being bothered by it.

“Yes. Judging by his conversations with you and his actions so far, he really seems to be making the decisions on his own after all.

So I thought it would be bad to still speak ill of him.”

Skathi had become certain of that during the recent ruckus with the Pack Dragons.

It had been inevitable that he left all the precise details to others, when the alarm bell rang in the harbour or when he met the princess later at night, but he had definitely been the first one to give out orders to everyone during that emergency.

A genuine figurehead without any decisional power would have waited until some told him to return to the residence, because it was dangerous, and obediently obeyed it then.

But Zenjirou had taken charge of the situation, commanded Governor Damian to take care of the matter and declared his return to the residence by himself.

Otherwise put, it was the best proof that he was aware of his own position and had the “intention” of being a cooperative figurehead as much as possible.

Princess Freya nodded satisfied, since she had never thought poorly of him to begin with.

“Indeed. It is very fortunate for us that such a sincere and straightforward person is ultimately responsible for the negotiations with us. I say we keep a conservative mindset until the end this time.“

Zenjirou was only thinking of finishing his given role acceptable. He neither wanted to betray the expectation from Aura, nor did he want to make a name for himself and damage his relationship with Aura.

The acceptable accomplishment of his work would also be acceptable to Princess Freya, his negotiation partner, since she considered herself to be in a “weak position”.

If they felt like it, the Carpa Kingdom could take the damaged “Yellow Leaves” by force and constrict her freedom.

Compared to that worst case scenario, it would be a huge success already, when she could just establish an “acceptable” trading route and return to her homeland.

“Certainly. Anyway, please go to bed now, Milady. Rest assured. I will definitely protect you, whether it be from a southern dragon, a foreign soldier or whatsoever.”

Squeezing her beloved spear, the trusted retainer vowed low-voiced, whereupon the princess gave her a soft smile and lay down on the bed without an argument.

“Thanks, Skathi. I trust you.”

And before long, Princess Freya peacefully entered the land of dreams, like she had asserted.

Chapter 05: A Crisis Born from Good Intentions

Three days later. Zenjirou looked down on the short young man kneeling before him, and kept an inexpressive look, although he had to strain all the muscles in his face in order to hide his inner nervousness.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Master Zenjirou. My name is Xavier, the third son of Marquis Guzzle. I am terribly honoured to be given the opportunity to become acquainted with you.”

The young man— Xavier offered his greeting clearly, but still somewhat awkwardly. Zenjirou continued to look down to him from his chair as he slowly began to speak.

“I am Zenjirou, the husband of Queen Aura I. Raise your head.”

“As you wish.”

When Xavier looked up to him so intensely that you could practically cut the tension with a knife, Zenjirou felt the urge to back off for a moment, but managed to suppress it.

(Hmm, I haven’t seen anyone as straightforward as him in a while.)

His first impression of the young man was quite positive, but unfortunately, Zenjirou lacked the composure right now to let it show on his face.

Xavier Guzzle was the appointed successor to Marquis Guzzle.

The mission to resolve the problem on the Salt Road had initially been given to him.

Together with a bearded hunter, he had been sent over to Valentia by Aura with the “Teleport Magic”. Zenjirou knew exactly what they were here for, since he was not an idiot.

Precisely because of that, his heart was currently beating so fast as though he had finished a full marathon just now.

If his assumption was correct, this young man had come to Valentia with extremely bad news for Zenjirou.

Nevertheless, he had to hear him out.

“So, why did Her Majesty send you over here?”

On the surface, it looked like Zenjirou was asking casually, but deep inside he was sweating bullets. Xavier then briskly took out a sealed document from his pocket.

Needless to say, the wax seal on it belonged to the Carpa Royal Family.

“Please look at this.”

With these words, Xavier humbly held the parchment out and the waiting maid Ines took it from him after a signal from Zenjirou. Once she had confirmed that it had not been tampered with, she opened it in front of Zenjirou.

“Go ahead.”

Under normal circumstances, the dragonskin parchment would be handed to Zenjirou, so that he could read through it, but regrettably, he still was not proficient enough in the language to read it by himself.

It looked a bit embarrassing, but Ines spread the letter so that Zenjirou could see it and read it out aloud while tracing the words with her right index finger, just like a mother reading her child a picture book.

“Then allow me. On this occasion, I nominate Xavier Guzzle to be put in charge of the Pack Dragon Subjugation. He shall fulfil his task as a direct report to Zenjirou Carpa, the current ‘fully authorized representative’ of the Duchess of Valentia.”

At the bottom stood the name of Queen Aura in her typical handwriting.

(I knew it.)

His presentiment proved to be true, so Zenjirou was seized with a pain that made him feel like he was going to black out. But well aware of the fact that it would be quite bad to let on about his mental state here, he pretended to be calm as he answered.

“I see. All right. The troops of Valentia were already dispatched to protect the nearby farms, though.

We will discuss the details tomorrow, when the other officers are back. Understood?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Xavier responded loud and clear, since he had no clue of the turmoil inside of Zenjirou.

* * *

“Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. What do I do now…”

Back in his own room later on, Zenjirou chased out all the acquainted waiting maids from the Inner Palace, starting with Ines, and broke out in a cold sweat once he was all alone in the room.

The problem that plagued him was obviously Xavier Guzzle, who had been leapt here with “Teleport” earlier.

His arrival taken by itself was truly a godsend. Xavier had actually encountered the Pack Dragons various times on the Salt Road, so he could confirm whether the Pack Dragons that had attacked Valentia were the same pack from the Salt Road and the "bearded man" he had brought with him, was a professional hunter, someone Zenjirou had lacked in his line-up.

His knowledge about dragons and his observant eyes would surely be a great help to the Dragon Subjugation. Aura must have thought the same, since she had used her precious magical power to cast "Teleport" twice on the same day.

However, her consideration had put Zenjirou in quite the political bind now.

"We already send out a Pack Dragon Subjugation Party at my behest. And I even put Raffaelo in charge of it already. But now Aura's interfering from the Capital. This won't end well."

At the time when he had sent a "Small Flying Dragon" to the Capital, the Subjugation Party had not been formed yet, so Aura obvious had no way of knowing about his further actions. It did not change the fact, though, that this situation was bad.

"Well, Aura did wrote that she's just 'nominating' him, so maybe I can overlook it? Nah, that would be bad. It would turn into a big mess, if the Prince Consort ignores a personal nomination from the Queen."

Zenjirou was mumbling away to himself.

Then, what would happen, if he were to accept her nomination and put Xavier in charge of the Pack Dragon Subjugation? That would actually be even worse.

After all, Zenjirou was the "fully authorized representative for the Duchess of Valentia" right now and Queen Aura had no

longer any authority as the original Duchess of Valentia, because that was what it meant to “represent the full authority”.

Thus, Zenjirou was practically the Duke of Valentia now, albeit representative, and Queen Aura was “interfering” in his business.

It was an unmistakable intervention from the Monarch into the self-government of a Feudal Lord’s domain.

“Argh, hasn’t Aura noticed anything? I doubt it… She probably thought the ‘Small Flying Dragon’ from me was asking for further instructions, instead of just exchanging information.”

The Capital and Valentia were too far away. Even if they made full use of the Small Flying Dragons and the “Teleport Magic” from Aura, an exchange of information still took three days.

It would inconvenience everyone at the scene, when you asked someone for help, who needed three or even four days to respond. Therefore, Zenjirou had only intended to report the matter, when he sent a “Small Flying Dragon”, but apparently, Aura had interpreted in such a way that he was waiting for instructions from her.

General Puyol had been worried that the “simplified message from a Small Flying Dragon could cause a misunderstanding” and as chance would have it, it proved to be true in this case.

But who was to be blamed now? Zenjirou? Because he did not wrote in the letter word by word that he merely wanted to exchange information and did not require further instruction?

Or was it Aura? Because she assumed that her husband in a faraway land was waiting for each order like always?

Or maybe Zenjirou after all? Because he usually acted passive and pretended to be incompetent as much as possible, yet he forgot all about that, since he was shocked by all the causalities around him, and acted quickly for a change?

"…Guess it's mainly my fault after all."

Zenjirou tended to put the blame on himself as a matter of principle, so he ultimately reached such a conclusion and hung his head in low spirits. In practical terms, Xavier and his bearded hunter were a valuable asset to the Pack Dragon Subjugation.

He could also understand what Aura had in mind. Marquis Guzzle had brought the original incident of all this on the table in order to let Xavier, the next Marquis, make a name for himself. When Aura had seemingly met with Xavier personally, he must have left such a good impression on her that she was willing to lend him a hand in that matter.

In other words, Aura had sent Xavier to Valentia in order to do him and Zenjirou a favour. A duplicate goodwill, so to speak.

But in reality, her good intentions were driving Zenjirou into a tight corner.

"No use crying over spilt milk. I get a sinking feeling, but I'll make it work out somehow."

He realized that he could not avoid a political éclat in its entirely, no matter what he did, so he slapped his cheeks with both hands and settled on that conclusion.

* * *

In the early morning of the next day, all the important figures in regards to the Pack Dragon Subjugation were assembled in the large conference room in the residence of the Duke of Valentia and sat around a long table.

Zenjirou had taken seat at the head of the table and looked into the faces of the gathered people as he spoke frankly.

“Okay, let’s hear your report first, Raffaelo.”

First of all, he called the name of the “current” person in charge of the Pack Dragon Subjugation: Raffaelo Márguez.

The addressed Raffaelo stood up on the spot and began to explain.

“Yes. Like before, the five units from the army of Valentia as well as the borrowed unit from the guards of Princess Freya have guarded the farms last night again. Fortunately enough, the Pack Dragons did not launch an attack.”

Zenjirou heaved a sigh of relief in light of that report.

Today was the fourth day after the initial attack. The Pack Dragons had already launched one more attack two days ago. For the second attack the Pack Dragon Subjugation Party had properly been prepared, so their counter-attack had made it in time and they managed to kill a couple of dragons while human causalities had been kept at zero.

However, it did not change the fact that a farm had been raided. The loss of livestock, mainly Meat Dragons, was quite severe again. If attacks of this kind continued to happen, all the nearby farms that provided meat and wheat for Valentia, would be demolished by the Pack Dragons.

Zenjirou put on a saturnine look and said.

“Good. I‘m glad to hear that they didn‘t attack, but the current situation won’t improve unless we exterminate the Pack Dragons. It’s important that we figure out how to wipe out the Pack Dragons while protecting the farms from them at the same time.”

He was only pointing out obvious facts by now, but everyone present nodded wholehearted on their seats.

Seeing their reactions, Zenjirou concluded that the right timing had come to introduce the two people standing behind him.

“And for that, we need detailed information about the Pack Dragons. The good news is that Her Majesty Aura has sent us a reliable support, because she had been worried about my ignorance on the matter.

Let me introduce him to you: Sir Xavier Guzzle.”

On the cue, the short young man took a step forward and introduced himself with flushed cheeks from nervousness.

“Th- Thank you for your kind words. My name is Xavier Guzzle. I have participated in the subjugation of the Pack Dragons on the Salt Road. And while I may still be wet behind the ears, I do hope that my experience can be of use to you somehow!”

Xavier was a prominent noble, who was appointed as the successor to Marquis Guzzle. Due to that, only Zenjirou, the Prince Consort, had a higher status than him amongst all the men gathered here. But he was still young and never really left his home domain before, so it would be kind of unreasonable to expect him not to be nervous in this situation.

Having said this, the bearded hunter standing next to him was even worse off on that note.

“And the man next to him is Mr. Antonio, a talented hunter from the March of Guzzle. I doubt you will find anyone more knowledgeable about Pack Dragons than him.

He was especially enlisted as an adviser, because of that.”

“M- My… My name is Antonio! N- Nice to make your acquaintance!”

Although he still looked like he could faint at any moment, he somehow managed to introduce himself. That effort was quite praiseworthy.

The middle-aged man was nothing but a mere hunter in a room with over ten noblemen, including one royalty. The normal reaction was to curse one’s own luck, instead of considering it an honour.

“Sir Xavier has encountered the Pack Dragons numerous times on the Salt Road and it goes without saying that Mr. Antonio is an expert on the field. I would like to hear their opinion on the matter.”

No one dared to reject the proposal from Zenjirou.

Around then minutes later, Zenjirou witnessed another good point of Raffaelo Márguez.

“I see. Then there is no doubt that the Pack Dragons from the Salt Road have fled here?”

“Yes, Sir Raffaelo. We surrounded the hill we identified as their hide-out from the east in a semi-circle, so if they escaped from there, they had to run west. Valentia lies in the west of the Salt Road, so it does match up.”

Completely freed of his nervousness, Xavier confidently answered the question from Raffaelo.

“I see. Then is it possible that the Pack Dragons have crossed some mountains in a few days to get here, Mr. Antonio?”

“Y- Yes. It’s definitely possible. No one can beat them, when it comes to running through a thick forest. But if it really are the Pack Dragons from the Salt Road, it means they kept losing out in the territorial fight inside the forest, like I mentioned earlier. And when they lost so often in such a short time, I’m not sure they still function as an organized pack…”

The bearded hunter on the other hand was still a nervous wreck, but at least, he could vocalize his own opinion without problem now.

It seemed that the man called Raffaelo Márguez was a “good listener”.

Practically paralysed with nervousness at the beginning, Xavier and the bearded hunter gradually regained their composure now while they talked with Raffaelo, who kept a soft tone and expression up the whole time.

Anyway, the brainstorming session about the Pack Dragons that attacked the Salt Road, and the Pack Dragons that were currently attacking Valentia, was going well thanks to that.

“Then it really may be better to assume that the Pack Dragons that attacked Valentia, were the same from the Salt Road.”

Raffaelo drew such a conclusion.

“Your reason being?”

Zenjirou asked for an explanation with this short utterance.

“Certainly. The main reason is that we found ‘blood from Pack Dragons’ at the first raided farm. Our troops did not manage to get there in time, so it raises the question who actually harmed the Pack Dragons? But it makes sense, when it were the Pack Dragons fleeing from the Salt Road.”

The blood of Pack Dragons was red like the one of humans, but it was extremely viscous and sticky, so it could easily be differentiated in daylight.

But the clarification from Raffaelo only created more doubt for Zenjirou instead.

“Hmm? You mean the wounded Pack Dragons from the Salt Road crossed a few mountains and came to Valentia while bleeding all the time? Isn’t it more likely that they die or the bleeding stops at some point?

When Zenjirou pointed out the obvious, the bearded hunter declared a different belief.

“Th- That is most likely attributed to the spears and arrows still stuck in them. They do heal quite fast, so even if an arrow remains stuck in their back, the wound will close after a while and the bleeding stops.

But since the arrowhead is still there, the wound will open again every time they move around too much, spilling some blood now and then.”

“I see.”

The coherent explanation from the hunter convinced Zenjirou for now. However, one of his doubts remained.

“Still, if it really is the same pack, why was the ‘Huge Pack Dragon’ never sighted during the two attacks here at Valentia?

The first attack aside, the subjugation party did fight the dragons during the second attack. Did the Huge Pack Dragon already die?"

It was Xavier, who responded to that question this time.

"Ah, no. Even on the Salt Road, the Huge Pack Dragon only got close enough to engage him once. It was always just giving orders from the back and kept himself safe deeper in the forest."

"Indeed. We did receive a report from a soldier that the Pack Dragons retreated into the forest on their second attack after a 'deep howl' could be heard from inside the forest."

Raffaelo testified like that so as to affirm the assertion from Xavier.

"Hmm…"

Zenjirou inadvertently frowned in light of that reasonable explanation. If their information and speculations were right, the Huge Pack Dragon was large, strong and smart, yet also a coward. It made their chase all the more troublesome.

"It would be easy to subjugate them, though, if we could immobilize them somehow."

A captain of the Valentia Army grumbled like that by accident. His irritation was understandable.

As a matter of fact, the Pack Dragons were admittedly tough opponents for unarmed villagers or trade caravans with only a few guards, but they were hardly a challenge for a well-trained army.

The problem was their quick legs.

"How about we dig a pitfall?"

“A Pack Dragon can jump as high as I am tall from a standing position. It would be pointless unless the hole is quite deep.”

“What about using something like bird lime then?”

“They have quite strong legs, so they will just break free from it. To begin with, they have an excellent nose as well, so it is quite likely that they will not even be trapped by it anyway.”

“Sheesh, how do they even move about so purposeful in the thick forest? If they just came over from the Salt Road, they shouldn’t be familiar with the area here.

Man, wild animals sure are unreckonable.”

The bearded hunter gave the complaining captain a wry smile while answering dutiful.

“Well, that is because of the ‘scent’. They urinate in various places or rub themselves against tree trunks in order to leave their own scent behind as a waymarker.”

“Their ’scent’?”

Zenjirou had only listened carefully so far, but that word called something to his mind.

“Then what would the Pack Dragons do, when we erase that scent?”

The sudden question from the Prince Consort seemed to confuse the bearded hunter, but he responded honestly nevertheless.

“I- It would throw them off. Or at least, they would halt and loiter for a while. …But, Master Zenjirou, your idea is not feasible. For one, their scent is pretty dominant. Secondly, they have a really good sense of smell. You cannot get rid of their scent so easily.”

Having discerned the plan from Zenjirou, the bearded hunter spoke apologetic, but Zenjirou was not put off by it.

“But since you know about it, there must exist a precedence, where the Pack Dragons were mislead by erasing the scent, no? How did that take place?”

“It was a landslide. An heavy rain during the rainy season washed away the whole trees on a slope. Then the Pack Dragons no longer had any waymarkers and made a ruckus, when they ended up in a completely different place.”

That certainly was not an easy method to erase the scent. An artificial landslide could not be come up with just like that.

“Hmm…”

Even so, Zenjirou was still confident that the plan to “erase the scent” had a chance of success.

He looked at everyone and spoke.

“Can we somehow utilize it, if there actually is a way to erase the scent?”

Raffaelo was the first to speak up in response to that.

“If what Mr. Antonio said is true and we really have a way to deliberately erase the scent, then we may be able to control their route to some extent by getting rid of some of the waymarkers beforehand.”

“Indeed. And when we establish a unit with a method to erase the scent, we could detain the attacking dragons by erasing the scent on their escape route.”

Following this, Xavier also brought up an idea he had thought of.

Then the captains of the Valentia Army joined the discussion, too, encouraged by the ideas of the two men.

“Certainly. Our problem is how they always get away. So as long as we can delay their escape even for a bit…”

“But isn’t it too late, when they have already entered the forest? We can’t use our ’Raptorial Dragons’ there. A pursue would be difficult, even if the Pack Dragons have lost their way for a bit.”

“The biggest concern is the Huge Pack Dragon, isn’t it? Once we defeat it, the rest will drop like flies. There’s no way such a large pack with over hundred dragons will stay organized after that.”

One of the captains said so with a confident expression. During the first attack, they could not get an accurate grasp on their numbers, but they properly engaged them on the second attack and a lot of soldiers turned in a report.

A normal pack usually consisted only of around ten dragons, so it could be called a calamity, when it suddenly consisted of a whole hundred dragons.

“A large pack with over hundred dragons? Are you sure about that?”

Xavier exclaimed surprised, when he heard that.

“Y- Yes, I am. Is there a problem?”

At this point, Xavier finally noticed that there was a discrepancy between their information.

All the information Valentia got about the “incident on the Salt Road” was passed on from Zenjirou and Raffaelo. They both had heard that “a large pack lead by a Huge Pack Dragon was blocking the Salt Road”, but they had not been told any details about it.

That was only natural. No one had expected that the ruckus with the Pack Dragon would escalate all the way to Valentia back then, when Zenjirou was “leapt” here.

Xavier realized that it was his duty to inform them about the details, so he revealed everything he knew while being extra careful not to cause a misunderstanding.

“The pack that attacked us on the Salt Road consisted of around fifty dragons. We engaged them several times and always killed some of them, but their numbers still amounted to fifty, when they attacked the next time.

General Puyol conjectured from that fact that they must keep a number of dragons separated from the main force as reserves.”

And that conjecture proved to be true.

Although they did not encounter the main force, the hunt with reinforcements revealed in the end that the pack did not consist of a petty number like fifty, judging by the abundant evidence (such as feces or claw marks) they found all around.

The bearded hunter had assumed that their numbers amounted to “at least two hundred, or at worst, to over five hundred”.

Despite that, the number of dragons attacking Valentia added up to over one hundred.

“What does that mean? Did they stock up the main force, because the battlefield here is wider than on the Salt Road?”

It would be the absolutely horror, when the dragons even took the size of the battlefield into consideration and adjusted their force accordingly, but considering the judgement of the Huge Pack Dragon so far, it could not be ruled out and that was a terrifying thought.

However, the one with the best knowledge about dragons and mountains, namely the bearded hunter, came up with a completely different opinion after musing for a while.

“No… The pack is most likely stretched to its limits.”

“Stretched to its limits?”

“What do you mean?”

The somewhat optimistic remark from the hunter threw everyone present into a dither.

From his humble point of view, the nobles and officers of the Royal Army looked at him elated, so the bearded hunter did flinch, but somehow managed to voice his idea.

“W- Well, I meant to say that the one hundred dragons that attacked, are the last hundred dragons of the pack.

It had bothered me from the beginning that the Pack Dragons would cross the mountains and yet again attack us humans on the other side, when they just had fled from the very humans on the Salt Road.

It’s a bit weird that they would attack a different ‘nest’ of humans after they just escaped from them.”

The captains inadvertently looked at each other.

Now that he mentioned it, it certainly made sense. The dragons had escaped from humans deep into the forest, so why would they next cross the mountains and attack humans again?

With all the gazes focused on him, the bearded hunter continued his explanation nervously.

“The forest has its own hierarchy. Each powerful dragon species has its own territory and the weak species have no

choice but to live in the space in between. But dragons are pack animals, so they need a wide territory.

Furthermore, the pack of the Huge Pack Dragon consisted of way above a hundred dragons. If they retreated deeper into the forest, they were bound to cause a 'fight over territory'.

The winner takes the territory and the loser flees in search for a different territory. Now I believe that the Pack Dragons have lost like this inside the forest over and over again, coming as far as to Valentia."

"You mean, there are dragons deep in the forest that can defeat a large pack with two or three hundred dragons on every occasion?"

Zenjirou, sitting on his chair, unconsciously looked into the direction of the forest. Needless to say, they were in the conference room in the residence of the Duke of Valentia, so all he could see was an aged stone wall, but in his mind, he pictured a monstrous dragon breaking down that wall with ease.

Born and raised in the Carpa Kingdom, Raffaelo and the others seemed to share that sentiment, albeit a bit stronger, so a chilly silence hung over the conference room for a while.

Still, no matter how monstrous it might be, they did not need to concern themselves with it right now as long as it did not suddenly came out of the thick forest. It was more important that they focused on the given threat now.

Raffaelo was the first to regain his composure and he checked with the bearded hunter in order to get the discussion back on track.

“Mr. Antonio, you are basically saying that the dragons that are currently attacking Valentia, are the ‘remnants of a defeated force’, correct?”

In response, the bearded hunter nodded with a confident expression as his intention had come across.

“Yes. I think their numbers gradually lessened, when they lost one fight over territory after another. It goes without saying that a fight over territory took place once they went deeper into the forest and since they came all the way to a human settlement, I would say it’s also beyond doubt that they kept losing. In that case, the size of the pack must to have decreased for sure.”

That theory sounded all too favourable to them, so it was to be taken with a grain of salt, but it certainly made sense.

It was hard to believe that dragons with an own territory inside the forest would let several hundred Pack Dragons pass through without a fight. Besides, the Pack Dragon had crossed several mountains covered with a thick forest at full speed in such a short time span, so it would be more natural to think that they simply left behind those, who could not keep up physically.

While such ideas were exchanged, Xavier remembered that he still had not revealed one more piece of information.

“Speaking of, the force of fifty dragons that attacked us on the Salt Road had no female dragons amongst it. It proved that we were dealing with their main force, but how was it here? Were there any females amongst the hundred dragons that attacked here?”

This question was answered by a young captain of the army as he raised his hand.

“Yes, indeed. We finished off several dragons during the second attack and one of them was certainly female.”

This strongly backed up the assumption from the bearded hunter.

“It seems we have reached a conclusion.”

Raffaelo said this and nodded convinced.

“The abnormal aggressiveness of the Pack Dragons certainly makes sense then, too. Instead of calling them aggressive, it would be more accurate to say that they were merely desperate for food.”

If they kept losing the fights over territory while they passed through the thick forest, it meant that they had one fierce battle after another and no time to properly search for food.

In that case, it would also make sense why the actually smart Huge Pack Dragon made a dangerous choice like attacking a human settlement. If they did nothing, they would starve. Before that happened, they might as well take a risk to get some prey. That had probably been its train of thought.

It was a bit sad that the powerful enemy raiding their farms turned out to be a cornered animal from the fights over territory, but a welcome fact, nevertheless.

The case would be closed, when they slaughtered the offensive one hundred dragons.

“Good. Looks like we all agree on it. Then we now have to speak about how to lay these last hundred dragons to rest. Your ideas, Gentlemen?”

Taking his cue from these words, Zenjirou started to discuss a concrete battle plan with Xavier and the others.

Chapter 06: Final Phase of the Dragon Subjugation

On the next day, the Pack Dragons launched an attack for the third time.

The first attack came out of nowhere, so one farm was devastated, but on the second attack, the retaliation made it in the nick of time.

And now, on the third attack, they had learned from the past and killed more Pack Dragons than during the second attack, successfully repelling them.

The biggest achievement during the third attack was the fact that Xavier Guzzle and his subordinate, the bearded hunter, were able to attend the battlefield.

Seeing the Pack Dragons attack in flesh, they confirmed that the pack was the same as the one that had wreaked havoc on the Salt Road.

The bearded hunter testified that he had recognized “several dragons with the same skin pattern and colour he had seen before”. It truly was the viewpoint of an expert, but the reason why Xavier was convinced of it was even simpler.

They had found a dragon that had an arrow stuck in its back. Once they killed that dragon and pulled out the arrow, it turned out that this arrow was shot from a “Dragon Bow”.

Since the “Dragon Bow” was far superior in force and range compared to an average bow, it also used special arrows that were geared to penetration.

Not even a single soldier in the army of Valentia was using a “Dragon Bow”.

In other words, that arrow was shot by the “Dragonback Archery Knights” from General Puyol.

It proved that the pack attacking Valentia was the same pack that had caused a turmoil on the Salt Road.

Furthermore, the bearded hunter had also confirmed that nearly half of the attacking dragons had been female.

It seemed that all his speculations had been spot on.

In that case, they only had to carry on like planned.

In order to make the fourth attack the last one, the army of Valentia “led by Zenjirou” started working on their final move.

The thick forest lay east of Valentia. As the commander, Zenjirou had entrusted a part of the army of Valentia to Xavier Guzzle, who faithfully pursued the mission given to him inside the forest.

“Absolutely do not draw your weapons until I say so. We want to leave as little metal scent as possible in the forest.”

Xavier was commanding soldiers, who he had met for the first time yesterday, instead of the well-known soldiers of his own domain, so his face revealed more nervousness and fervour than necessary.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Understood.”

However, the soldiers of the Valentia army were obediently following the orders of their fledgling commander on their first mission with him for now, since he apparently won their

favour by displaying a zest for action despite being young and inexperienced.

As far as Xavier could tell, the Valentia soldiers were just as disciplined as the soldier from the March of Guzzle he had led before.

Thus, he was “neither thrilled, nor put off” by them. Having said this, it would be foolish to face them with the same mindset as the soldiers from his domain, since their numbers were admittedly the same, but the mutual trust between them was nowhere near the same.

(Still, Her Majesty Aura had said she would put me in charge…)

Inside the dim forest, Xavier watched over the soldiers checking tree after tree, while he harboured such thoughts.

His current position was a frontline commander under the direct command of Zenjirou, the supreme commander of the army of Valentia.

All the soldiers of Valentia participating in the dragon subjugation were assigned to Xavier, except for one unit, so he did was in charge of the subjugation in essence.

But the Prince Consort Zenjirou was the supreme commander, albeit just for show, and Raffaelo Márguez held the title of “staff officer”.

Raffaelo was only leading one unit consisting of the personal guards from Zenjirou, but he had an equal standing to Xavier on the paper.

Moreover, the soldiers from the Uppsala Kingdom of the North Continent were participating, too, even if only a few of them, but Xavier had no authority over them as well.

(I wonder if I be able to fulfil my duty properly, when the real fight starts.)

It was understandable that Xavier was plagued by such a worry.

Still, nothing would change for the better, when he became pessimistic now.

He shook his head and tried to focus on the task at hand, when he suddenly heard the well-known voice of the bearded hunter.

“Master Xavier, we found it! There is no doubt! The Pack Dragons have ‘marked’ the tree here.”

“Really! Good, then begin as discussed!”

“Yes, Sir.”

Once Xavier gave the order, two soldiers took a wooden barrel and headed for the tree that the bearded hunter had identified as a “waymarker”.

“Okay, down on three. One, two, three!”

After setting down the barrel in the scrub, one soldier wiped the sweat from his forehead and heaved a sigh of relief. Following this brief rest, the soldiers opened the lid of the large barrel and scooped its content with a long ladle.

The large barrel was filled with white powder.

“Well then, please scatter it evenly around this tree.”

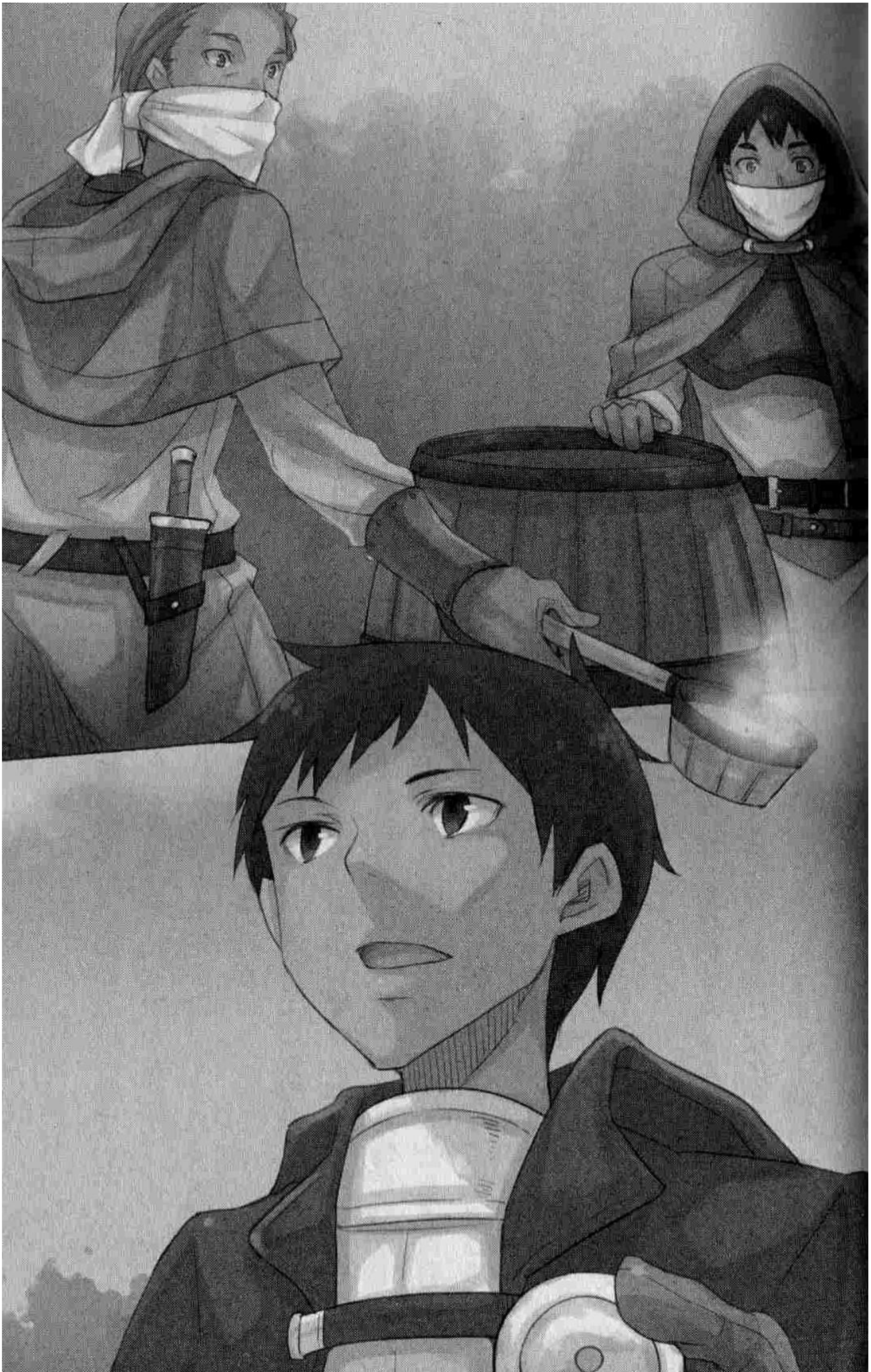
“Alright.”

“Be careful not to get any into your eyes. If you think it happened nevertheless, stand back and wash out your eyes with the water from the water barrel.”

“Roger!”

“Here I go!”

The soldiers scattered the white powder they had scooped with the ladle, on the tree pointed out by the bearded hunter, and its surroundings.



The dark brown trunk of the tree and the deep green scrub were painted white in no time.

“Still, will something like that really fool the noses of the Pack Dragons?”

“Who knows, but we might as well try.”

“Well, yeah. We’re just following orders anyway.”

The white powder the sceptical soldiers were scattering was actually “slaked lime”.

Once Zenjirou had found out that most dishes in Valentia made use of clams, he had grinded the seashells with a stone mortar after burning them at an high temperature, in order to present it to Aura for the glass manufacture.

The burnt lime gained from the scorched seashells was an hazardous substance. It would suddenly heat up several hundred degree, if it came in contact with water.

When you let the burnt lime react with water once, it turned into slaked lime after the reaction subsided.

Slaked lime was a deodorant that was often used in Modern Japan as well. Since it erased smells while being relatively harmless to the human body or nature, people used it in their garden for example, to erase the smell of the excrements of their pets in order not to bother the neighbours.

Nonetheless, Zenjirou was an amateur in this field. It remained to be seen if the slaked lime he created would work properly. He had put it into a wooden barrel and sealed it for what it was worth, but the reaction might have continued, turning it into calcium carbonate. The slaked lime admittedly worked against the smell of excrements from dogs and cats, but it was questionable if it would work all the same against the

excrements from Pack Dragons. And lastly, it was unknown whether this deodorant was strong enough to fool the nose of the Pack Dragons, since the bearded hunter had claimed that they had a “strong sense of smell”.

There were a lot of open question. But unfortunately, there had been no better idea to manipulate the movements of the Pack Dragons.

Thus, they had concluded that it was at least worth a try.

“Can we really affect the Pack Dragons with this?”

Xavier had given all the necessary orders, so he walked over to the bearded hunter and asked him that this late in the game.

The hunter scratched his thick beard.

“Hard to say. If this deodorant really works like Master Zenjirou has said, then I would say it is possible.

Later we just have to find a similar tree, rub some skin and urine of the Pack Dragons against it. Yes, I say it has a good prospect of success.”

The skin was taken from the Pack Dragons they had defeated during the third attack and the urine was secured along with the urinary bladder dissected from the same dragons.

They would mark different trees with them in order to deceive the Pack Dragons and lure them onto a battlefield prepared by them.

That was the substance of the Pack Dragon Extermination Strategy from the Valentia Army.

Incidentally, it had been Zenjirou as well to suggest that they use the skins and urinary bladders from the defeated dragons. Once upon a time, he had watched a TV show, where the fur

and urine of a bear had been used to ward off boars and monkeys, since it made them believe that the area was the territory of a bear.

Anyway, it drastically raised their chance to completely annihilate the Pack Dragons, instead of just repelling them, if they managed to drag them out onto a pre-prepared battlefield.

“We will definitely settle the score in the next battle.”

Xavier muttered as if to convince himself.

Needless to say, the ulterior motive of this strong resolve was to make a name for himself as the next Marquis of Guzzle by concluding this incident with his own hands.

Regardless of how, the prey had already escaped once from General Puyol. It would definitely go beyond the credit of a mere Dragon Subjugation, if he defeated them.

Still, he could not deny his genuine desire to help the involved victims as well as fulfilling his given duty at the same time.

“I will not let it drag on any longer.”

His small stature trembled from a sense of duty and a desire to fight.

* * *

Around the same time, the farm that had been chosen for the final clash was quickly remodelled into a battlefield.

The chosen farm was relatively large and located near a river.

It had been chosen for three reasons. Number one being its sufficient distance to the thick forest.

The second reason was that it was located in a relative lowland plain with small hills south and north of it.

And lastly, the relative recent foundation of the farm provided the third reason.

The first reason, namely the distance to the thick forest, made it more difficult for the Huge Pack Dragon to give out orders from within the forest. Even the cautious Huge Pack Dragon would have to come out of the forest in that case.

It would be somewhat problematic, if the Huge Pack Dragon insisted on staying inside the forest by all means, but they had a countermeasure for that as well, just in case.

The importance of the second reason, namely the lowland plain with a small hill, goes without saying. They would leave the livestock, mainly Meat Dragons, at the farm and deploy the soldiers on top of the hills. This turned the whole farm into a nice trap.

As for the third reason, it was linked to the second one. Since the whole farm was becoming a trap, they temporarily had to evacuate the farmers behind the stone walls of Valentia.

A newly established farm meant that its elder inhabitants were originally born and raised in the city of Valentia. These elders would teach the rest about the rules of the city without the officials having to, so it would cause less problems, when the refugees came in.

“Sir Raffaelo! We have finished setting up the stake wall at the entrance of the farm!”

“The foxholes on the southern hill are completed, too.”

“Same goes for the northern hill.”

While listening to the reports from the soldiers, Raffaelo Márguez issued all the orders with his usual calm smile.

“Understood. When you are done with your work, escort the farmers back to Valentia. Do not lower your guard until you are there.”

“Yes, Sir!”

Of course the soldiers could not do all the work by themselves, so they had rounded up the farmers, mainly young men, to help out.

The helpers had to be paid for their work. The livestock for the trap had to be bought up. And the seized farm itself had to be compensated for as well.

All this money required for the operation came from the pocket of Zenjirou. The very money Aura had given him to “buy anything he took a fancy to”.

Fortunately enough, Princess Freya was giving him the desired goats for free, so he still had all the money at his disposal.

Thanks to that, everything could be funded without problem so far, but he also had to pay for the livelihood expenses in Valentia of the farm refugees.

If this operation dragged on, the funds would run out. Of course the treasury of Valentia, which was said to be even greater than the one in the Capital, had enough capacities, but Zenjirou absolutely wanted to bring the incident to an end without using the money for which Aura had given no permission.

As a matter of fact, Raffaelo understood his inmost intention the best.

“He really is the person my dear stepmother described him as.”

As he had no more orders to give right now, Raffaelo cast a glance at the distant walls of Valentia and muttered to himself.

His stepmother was Lady Octavia and she was working as a private tutor for Zenjirou. Due to that, she previously had told Raffaelo all kind of things about him, but after meeting him in person, Raffaelo was once again reminded of how accurate his other mother could judge people.

Lady Octavia had said the following:

“He is extremely intelligent, down-to-earth and resolute. And above all, he harbours a genuine affection and faithfulness towards Her Majesty Aura.”

Well, his mother had the tendency to exaggerate the compliments more than necessary, when evaluating someone, but putting the “extremely” aside, Raffaelo had noticed during their short acquaintance that Zenjirou indeed possessed an adequate wisdom, reasoning and determination.

Despite that, Zenjirou never took action by himself, neither in the Royal Palace, nor here in Valentia. That was because he was well aware of the fact that any rash assertive moves from him might sabotage Queen Aura instead.

Although he voluntarily discredited himself as “incompetent” and “effeminate”, he always did everything in his might to make things convenient for the Queen, so it was undeniable that his affection and faithfulness towards her were anything but normal.

“Then the current situation must be rather unpleasant for him.”

Even if it was in name only, Zenjirou did get involved with the Dragon Subjugation as the “supreme commander”. Raffaelo accurately reasoned about that worry of his as well.

The current situation obviously deviated from his usual policy to stay in the background and appear incompetent without taking credit for himself as much as possible.

Originally, Raffaelo had been put in charge, but Xavier Guzzle had barged in from the side as he was sent from the Capital.

As a result, the roles had been reassigned. In name only, Zenjirou himself was in charge, whereas Raffaelo and Xavier were practically equals working under him, but Xavier was leading eighty percent of the troops.

Raffaelo was the “staff officer” and granted just as much authority in the planning of the operation as Xavier, but he would have almost no chance to fight a real battle.

This complex ranking was literally crying out for a desperate attempt to right some kind of grave discrepancy between Aura in the Capital and Zenjirou in Valentia.

“It might prove to be an interesting ‘story’ to report to my father later on.”

Mumbling that, Raffaelo showed the usual calm smile on his face.

* * *

At around the same time in the residence of the Duke of Valentia in the centre of Valentia, Zenjirou confronted the passionate persuasion from Governor Damian, with a stern face.

“Master Zenjirou, would you please reconsider?”

The middle-aged man appealed almost pleading, but Zenjirou answered brusque while giving him an indifferent look.

“No.”

“Master Zenjirou…”

Sir Damian was choking back his tears and while this would have worked coming from a beautiful maiden, it was nothing but annoying, when an middle-aged man did it.

“Frankly speaking, it is utterly insane that you want to go out on the battlefield yourself, Master Zenjirou. If something were to happen to you, I would not be able to face Her Majesty Aura in the Capital again.”

Nonetheless, Sir Damian still tried to persuade Zenjirou with these words.

The matter that plagued him was the fact that Zenjirou was going to lead the soldiers onto the battlefield himself.

“You’re exaggerating it. I’ll be nowhere near the actual frontline.”

Zenjirou intended to deploy himself and the soldiers far away from the trap village, where Xavier lay in ambush.

They were supposed to be on stand-by just in case the guidance of the Pack Dragons went wrong and they would have to protect the other nearby farms that had not been evacuated.

Of course Zenjirou had no idea how to lead an army, so Raffaelo Márguez would actually give out the orders as the “staff officer”. In other words, Zenjirou would be a mere figurehead there as well.

Because of that, Sir Damian claimed that there was no need for Zenjirou to leave the walls of Valentia and should just stay in

the residence of the Duke of Valentia while leaving everything else to Raffaelo.

As a matter of fact, his opinion was completely warranted, if you only took the efficiency at the scene into account.

Even Zenjirou himself had not the slightest desire to expose himself to danger and was well aware of the fact that he would be nothing but a hindrance on the battlefield.

(I hope he would stop trying to persuade me so passionately. To be honest, I'm already starting to doubt my decision.)

Oblivious to Zenjirou feeling weak at the knees, Sir Damian continued to reason with him.

"A battlefield is unpredictable. Permit me to remark that your safety is far more important than the safety of Valentia."

At the present time, Zenjirou was one of only three royalty in the Kingdom that inherited a "bloodline magic". Furthermore, he was the only grown-up male from them.

From the point of view of simply increasing the practitioners of the "bloodline magic", it would be no exaggeration to say that he was even more important than Queen Aura or the infant Prince Carlos.

Zenjirou was able to relate to that, so he started to question his own decision, when he was told all that.

But he shook off the thought.

"No. It's a great chance to win fame with barely any risk. Why should I pass on it?"

Zenjirou spoke like a short-sighted person obsessed with fame to get rid of the protest from Sir Damian.

Needless to say, he had not the slightest intention to win fame for himself. If anything, he planned to lay the groundwork as much as possible in order to declare that he had been nothing but a figurehead, when this incident was resolved safely.

Then why did he insist on leaving the safe stone walls, although he knew that he would be a hindrance? Because this incident was a “subjugation” of the dragons.

For a defensive mission with the purpose to “protect”, it was acceptable that the commander stayed behind the walls and gave orders, but that was not the case for an offensive mission.

In such a case, the person giving orders on the frontline was acknowledged as the highest ranking person for the mission, automatically assuming that the superior officer behind the walls had “entrusted all authority” to the commander on the frontline.

And like the “subjugation“ part implied in the current Pack Dragon Subjugation, it was a full-fledged offensive mission. Technically, it could also be seen as a defensive mission to protect the city of Valentia from the threat of the Pack Dragons, but in the Capital, Aura had acknowledged the mission as a resumption from the subjugation on the Salt Road, so it was officially recorded as an offensive mission.

(If Xavier ends up as the highest ranking person, they’ll believe that I, the fully authorized representative for the Duke of Valentia, have accepted the intervention from Queen Aura and changed the personnel.)

It would mean that Queen Aura had meddled with the self-governance of the domain, when Xavier was appointed as the highest ranking person. Likewise, it would mean that the

Prince Consort had ignored the orders from the Queen, when Xavier was not appointed as the highest ranking person.

Either decision would cause problems. After wracking his brain over it, Zenjirou had come up with this desperate workaround.

He himself would be the highest ranking person in name only. In the field, though, Xavier was obviously the highest ranking person. And Raffaelo, whom he had initially put in charge, would be an equal to Xavier on paper as the “staff officer” and command his bodyguards, giving him at least the necessary authority in the field.

Xavier would have to put up with being the “highest ranking person in the field”, although he was promised to be put in charge by Queen Aura. Raffaelo would have to put up with being the “highest ranking person for strategic planning”, although he had been put in charge once before. And Zenjirou would reluctantly act as the “highest ranking person in name only”, although he originally had intended to do nothing.

This compromise in staffing slightly differentiated from the respective expectations all three of them have had.

(Rather than compromising, I get the feeling we’re walking a really fine line here.)

Zenjirou inwardly suffered from a stomach.

Still, a following political scandal could not be avoided wholewise, so this was the tamest solution Zenjirou had been able to come up with.

The problem was that others would think that the “Prince Consort showed signs of ambition”, but he had no choice but to deal with that later on by discussing it in length with Aura.

“B- But what are we going to do about Princess Freya? If you take your guards with you, she will be all alone here with her own guards.”

Damian still refused to back down, whereupon Zenjirou evaluated the middle-aged governor at heart as someone, who was really passionate about his duty, even if part of it was due to self-preservation.

“No need to worry about that. I have already discussed it with Princess Freya. She readily agreed to accompany me. Needless to say, that goes for her guards, too.”

Although he spoke about it so casually, the matter was hardly to be taken lightly.

“Sh- She will… No way…”

Damian was finally at a loss for words.

No surprise. After all, not only Zenjirou, one of the three most important people of the country, was going out on the battlefield, but also Princess Freya, an acknowledged royalty from overseas. Any sane person would only take that for a joke.

As a matter of fact however, there was no way that they could leave Prince Freya behind all alone in the residence of the Duke of Valentia, when Zenjirou left with all his guards.

Once his guards left the city, the only troops remaining in Valentia would be the coast guards and the city patrols.

That fighting force was a bit too unreliable to stop Princess Freya, if she were to act malicious in an unlikely event. Thus it was better for their peace of mind to remove that very anxious altogether by taking Princess Freya complete with guards along with them.

“The decision is set in stone.”

"…Very well."

When Zenjirou spoke resolutely like that, Damian abandoned the persuasion at last and hung his head disappointed.

* * *

Two days later then.

The Pack Dragons launched their fourth attack.

Their target was the farm near the river, where Xavier was waiting with his troops after laying a snare. With one attack alone, it could not be said whether the idea from Zenjirou had success or if it was a mere coincidence, but either way, the important fact right now was that this outcome was playing right into their hands.

"The Pack Dragons are coming!"

"Good. All hands, take your position! All orders from now on will be given by hand signals until the battle commences. Do not make a single sound in the meantime!"

Xavier gave the last order like that and also laid down prone in the shallow hole they had dug on the hill.

His whole body from head to toe was rubbed with plant sap and mud in order to erase the body odour, which in all honesty, was not really a fascinating sight.

The wet mud stuck to his scalp and made it itchy. Apparently some of the mud also had gotten into his ears, when he applied it, so the inside of his ears felt sandy. Every time he licked his lips, he tasted a bitter and acrid flavour, since there was plant sap around his mouth.

The whole situation was just disgusting, but even so, Xavier suppressed that instinctual disgust and simply waited for the right time.

(So far, everything is going as planned. We will definitely put an end to them here.)

He persuaded himself like that and strongly crunched with his back teeth from the bitter plant sap taste in his mouth.

More than anyone else, Xavier knew how lucky he actually was.

The original mission had been prepared by his father Marquis Guzzle for him in order to ease his worry about succeeding the title of Marquis. Because of a lack of forces, he had given up the leading role once, though. And even though he had called General Puyol for reinforcements, he was now, at the end of the road, entrusted with the full command over the decisive battle.

If he were to fail here now, he would never be able to face his father, General Puyol and Queen Aura again after they had such a high opinion of him. Eager or quasi zealous at heart, Xavier clenched his fists and then the Pack Dragons finally appeared.

“GII GII!”

“GII!”

There was an enormous number of them. They definitely amounted to almost a hundred. The first rough estimate from Xavier counted around ninety-four, which seemed a bit too few. During the second and third attack, some dragons had been defeated, so that might be the reason they no longer filled up the hundred.

The attacking dragons stopped at the entrance of the farm for now.

A fence of trees with sharpened tops blockaded the entrance. Its height only extended to around the shoulder of a human at best, though.

“GII GII!”

That height was no challenge for the Pack Dragons to skip over. The bunch of Pack Dragons leaped over the fence one after another. Instead of skipping over it, some well-built dragons even dared to jump against the fence, destroying it in the progress.

The fence was not slowing down the Pack Dragons in the slightest, but that did not affect the strategy of the battle.

To begin with, it had been built to prevent the “Meat Dragons”, which were left inside the farm as bait to lure in the Pack Dragons, from escaping, instead of defending against the Pack Dragons.

The height of the fence was a piece of cake for the two-legged Pack Dragons with their superior jumping power, but for the four-legged Meat Dragons with their short legs and plump bodies, it proved to be an insurmountable obstacle.

“PIGI!”

“PII PII!”

The Meat Dragons screamed and scattered in all direction, when the carnivores suddenly appeared.

Speaking of, where was the Huge Pack Dragon?

That thought suddenly crossed Xavier’s mind and he took a small peek out of the hole on the hill, observing the entrance of the farm. But its silhouette was nowhere to be seen.

(That means he is not coming out of the forest, not even at this point.)

It was a bit disappointing, but not really a problem in itself. They did choose this farm, because there was enough distance between it and the thick forest.

When the boss did not come out of the forest despite that distance, it meant that they had succeeded in separating the commander from its troops.

The Pack Dragons had always been so annoyingly quick to retreat, because their boss, namely the Huge Pack Dragon, had made all the calls. The Huge Pack Dragon had developed an abnormal intelligence, but all the other Pack Dragons were not even smart enough to go against their wild instincts.

The chance of success for the battle had gone up drastically with this.

Xavier licked his lips, which had gotten dry from nervousness, while the cruel game of hide and seek between the Meat Dragons and Pack Dragons in the uninhabited farm entered its final phase.

“GII GII!”

“PII!”

“GROWL!”

Normally, the Meat Dragons would have no chance of escaping from the Pack Dragons, but that would have been inconvenient to Xavier and the others, so they had set up round logs vertically between the buildings like clothes poles to stop the Pack Dragons.

With their four short legs, the Meat Dragons could easily slip through under the logs at the heights of a human chest, but the

two-legged Pack Dragons were taller than a human, so it was the perfect height for a blockade, forcing them to jump over it.

As a result, the majority of the Meat Dragons managed to escape death and fled to the open square of the farm. Chasing after them, the Pack Dragons reached the square a bit later.

Having said this, the open squared belonged to a small farm. It was not wide enough to accumulate all of the almost one hundred Pack Dragons at once. Nonetheless, Xavier wanted to kill as much of them as possible on their first strike, so he suppressed his urge to give the order to attack right away and waited for the right timing.

All of the Pack Dragons had already entered the farm without exception and around forty percent of them had gathered in the open square so far.

Needless to say, not all of the Meat Dragons could escape, so some Pack Dragons could be seen here and there how they happily feasted on the unlucky Meat Dragons that had been caught, but it was still on a tolerable level.

(Okay, now is the time!)

The time was ripe. Sensing it, Xavier simply raised the staff of command in his right hand while still lying prone on the hill. The nearby soldiers could be heard swallowing hard from the tension.

The soldiers on the other hill across were supposed to see it, too. At this point, there was no way to tell, if they really had, though.

Xavier took courage and quickly swung down the staff of command in his right hand.

In the next moment, all the soldiers around him sprang to their feet, drew the longbows in their hands and shot the arrows.

Several hundred arrows shot through the air with a whing and hailed down on the Pack Dragons chasing their prey in the farm below.

Three hundred archers had hidden on the hill and another three hundred on the other side. That made a volley of six hundred arrows in total.

“GYA!?”

The Pack Dragons that could scream were still better off. Most of dragons were hit by the rain shower of arrows from above and died without knowing what was going on.

The physique of a dragon was usually beyond the imagination of man. An arrow or two would not kill them and depending on the impact point, they would not even notice that they had been hit. However, it was a different matter, when six hundred arrows rained down on less than one hundred Pack Dragons.

Moreover, the bows from the soldiers of the Valentia army were longbows. Its range and penetration power was on a completely different level from the short bows, which the soldiers from the March of Guzzle led by Xavier had handled.

Of course they were still no match for the “Dragon Bows” used by the “Dragonback Archery Knights”, but the terrain made up for it. The archers were shooting from a hill down on the gathered Pack Dragons below.

Under these favourable conditions, the longbow demonstrated the same penetration power as the “Dragon Bow” on a plain.

As a matter of course, it would be a miracle, if they could only aim at the Pack Dragon and spare the Meat Dragons at this

distance. Since that was not the case, the Meat Dragons were caught in the crossfire and wiped out after they had splendidly fulfilled their role as bait.

A sad, but necessary sacrifice.

Anyway, one volley was certainly not enough to completely wipe out the almost one hundred Pack Dragons. Some dragons were even unhurt, since they had taken cover behind the buildings.

“GIIII!”

A dozen of the surviving Pack Dragons chose to attack the humans on the hill instead of running away.

The little slope was nothing for the powerful legs of the Pack Dragons. Utilizing their two thick hind legs and even thicker tail, they rushed up the hill, where the archers stood, with a speed no human could ever hope to achieve.

However, Xavier and his men had anticipated this development as well.

“Archers, fall back. Spearmen, forward!”

Upon the order from Xavier, the archers stood back and in exchange, the soldiers with long spears stood atop the hill.

Their spears were almost twice as long as the wearer himself was tall. Needless to say, an average soldier could not wield such a long weapon at will.

But they only had to point the tip of the long spear towards the Pack Dragons running up the hill.

“GII!”

“GI!?”

No matter how strong the legs of the Pack Dragons were, they definitely could not make a jump on a steep hill. The Pack Dragons ran straight into the risen spears and did not advance any further.

Under normal circumstances, it would be impossible for humans to stop the charge of a Pack Dragon, but the advantage of the terrain bore fruit here as well.

The soldiers pointed the spears down from atop the hill and the Pack Dragons were running up the hill from below. It usually was difficult to upset the collision between these two, but the higher ground made their momentums barely equal, if not inverting their initial situation.

“GUGI!”

A few Pack Dragons slipped and fell down the hill, whereas the reorganised archers shot the dragons that were still barely standing, with arrows through the gaps between the spearmen.

“GI!”

Before long, the few attacking Pack Dragons had kicked the bucket without achieving anything.

Although Xavier was the commander, he observed the battle unfold from a distant point of view as though it did not concern him.

“Wow… Is this what General Puyol meant?”

He recalled the words of the general in the back of his mind.

According to General Puyol, the strength of humans lay in technique, weapons and cooperation.

Back then, the general himself had pushed a Pack Dragon to the ground head-on right after saying this, so Xavier had laughed it

off, but the claim of the general certainly felt vindicated, when he saw it in action now.

The army from the March of Guzzle had been pressed for a though fight on the Salt Road, because of its limited space. During the following hunt in the forest, even the “Dragonback Archery Knights” led by General Puyol had to put forth an effort to finish off a couple of Pack Dragons.

The difference in the battles was overwhelming, now that they outnumbered them and had the advantage of the terrain.

They had exchanged the short spears meant for the thick forest and the short bows meant for even terrain, with long spears and long bows and instead of leaping into enemy territory, they had drawn the enemy onto a battlefield prepared by them, attacking at the same time with the whole force.

Just by doing that, the result was outstanding.

Somehow calming his excitement, Xavier now watched over the battlefield below him.

The battle was practically over, but they still had to finish off the remaining dragons. Xavier suddenly felt a temptation, when he saw the scene below.

At this point, it would be alright for him to participate in the battle himself, would it not? He did not want to brag, but Xavier was confident that his skills with the bow were at least as good as the skills of the soldiers around here.

With that in mind, he readied his hands, but noticed that he was holding a certain “something” in his hands instead and turned red with anger.

His hands were holding the “staff of command”. It was not his favourite bow or spear, but rather a small wooden stick that had literally no offensive power.

(Oh right. My duty is not to slay Pack Dragons with my own hands. I have to give the right orders, so that the soldiers finish off as many Pack Dragons as possible while as few of my subordinates as possible die.)

Reminded of his given role again, the young commander overviewed the whole battlefield and then gave an order.

“Near the river on the north side. Four dragons on the run. Stop them before they can jump into the river!”

In the end, only very few Pack Dragons had been able to escape from the trap under Xavier’s command.

* * *

Some time earlier.

When Xavier and his men had laid in wait on the hills with bated breath, an exceptional large Pack Dragon stood in the thick forest.

Its size would surely mess up your perception of distance, when you were somewhat familiar with the animal called Pack Dragon. At the very least, it was twice as big as a normal Pack Dragon. In actual fact, the Pack Dragon was classified as a medium-sized carnivore dragon, but this dragon was an expectation, large enough to be called a large-sized carnivore dragon.

But the top brass of the Carpa Kingdom had not been worried about the mere classification of this Huge Pack Dragon. The problem with this huge carnivore dragon was that it had gained wisdom over the years and in accordance with it, a thoughtful judgement.

Even while its subordinated Pack Dragons charged the farm as hungry as a wolf, only the Huge Pack Dragon had obstinately not taken a single step outside the thick forest.

Of course it could afford that privilege, precisely because it was the boss and the other dragons would bring it a part of the spoils, but its prudence was still abnormal. One might as well call it a coward.

And right now, it was displaying that very prudence again.

It was at the very time, when Xavier swung down the staff of command on the hill and unleashed the all-out attack against the Pack Dragons.

Six hundred arrows cut through the air and then rained down on the subordinated Pack Dragons, whose death cries reached all the way to the forest, to the ears of the Huge Pack Dragon.

“GROWL…!”

The sounds were not descriptive enough to allow an accurate grasp on the situation.

But the Huge Pack Dragon concluded that it was “bad news” based on instinct and experience.

Should they retreat? The exceptional developed brain of the Huge Pack considered that option.

However, the already fighting Pack Dragons would not hear the Huge Pack Dragon, even if it were to give the order with its loudest voice. Still, running away by itself and abandoning its

subordinates was not an option for the Huge Pack Dragon, either.

Over the years, the Huge Pack Dragon had grown bigger and accumulated wisdom, but in exchange, it also had lost various things. The first being its agility and the second being its tolerance for simple food.

Having grown too big, the Huge Pack Dragon could no longer make small turns in exchange for its superior strength, making it unsuitable for hunting. Yet his large body needed a great deal of food to survive.

As a result, the Huge Pack Dragon could no longer live without subordinates that provided it with food.

In a way, it was a “parasite” inside the pack.

“GRR…”

After a moment of pondering, it seemed to have reached a decision. The Huge Pack took one step outside.

Between the forest and the farm extended a plain without any place to hide.

Unless its crossed at least half of that plain, its orders would not be heard by the dragons attacking the farm.

After advancing for a while, the Huge Pack Dragon stopped, when it noticed a shadow ahead.

“GROWL?”

It was fully armed human soldier. The Huge Pack Dragon was well aware how scary an armed human was. With a hundred of them, the Huge Pack Dragon would surely abandon its subordinate and run away. Not quite, it would probably already

turn on its heel with just ten of them, considering there was no ally in the vicinity.

The leader of the Pack Dragons was that cautious and that cowardly. This cowardice had assured its survival until now and had even given it this irregular large body.

However, there stood no hundred men before the Huge Pack Dragon right now. Not even ten. Only a single human blocked its path.

Considering the difference in their physiques, the expression of "blocking its path" seemed more than ridiculous.

The blocking soldier aka. Victoria Kronkvist let her blonde hair tied up in a ponytail wave in the wind while she looked at the nearby Huge Pack Dragon with an unconcerned expression void of any fighting spirit.

"Oho, that's the Huge Pack Dragon? It certainly is huge."

Saying that, the female warrior drew her favourite short spear.

Xavier was taking on the main force of the Pack Dragon with the main body of their army while Zenjirou and Princess Freya stood on stand-by with their troops at a distant point in case the deception of the Pack Dragons went wrong.

When they had decided on this tactic, the first problem that came up was how they were going to deal with the boss aka. the Huge Pack Dragon.

The farm, where they lured the dragons to, was far enough away from the thick forest, so even the Huge Pack Dragon should participate in the battle this time without staying behind in the forest.

That was what they had predicted, but a prediction was nothing but one possibility. Even this time, the Huge Pack Dragon might remain in the thick forest again.

What would they do in that case? It was a no-brainer. They just had to prepare a special forces against the Huge Pack Dragon.

But it was difficult to appoint people to it. After all, they were anticipating that the Huge Pack Dragon would likely appear at the farm. In other words, the special forces would end up not being needed, if everything went according to plan.

But in the other unlikely event, they would get the biggest achievement of defeating the Huge Pack Dragon. Furthermore, it was already an established fact that the Huge Pack Dragon was good at running away.

It was a delicate appointment that would be useless, if everything worked well, but earned the biggest credit otherwise. Moreover, the position required the ability to prevent a possible escape of the Huge Pack Dragon.

It was a tough choice. So much that Raffaelo Márguez wanted to do it himself at first.

But then Victoria Kronkvist had volunteered for the position as she had been present at the strategy planning.

She had confidently declared: “I have the means to stop the Huge Pack Dragon.”

“The Huge Pack Dragon will choose to flee once the odds are against it. What are you supposed to do then, if you want to defeat it without it running away?

The answer is: Confront it with as few people as possible, so that it will not consider the situation as disadvantageous. Simple as that."

The female warrior mumbled that as if it did not concern her and closed the distance to the Huge Pack Dragon with movements that seemed to suggest she was being unwary.

Any sane person would hardly ever call that "simple as that", more probably "crazy".

To begin with, a human was not capable of fighting a dragon one on one.

The Pack Dragon was a weak species amongst the carnivore dragons, but it would take three average soldiers to barely take down one of them head-on without projectiles.

Even most of the well-trained "Dragonback Archery Knights" would lose a single combat against a Pack Dragon with a spear or sword.

Not to forget, the Huge Pack Dragon was an abnormal existence that went beyond the scope of a Pack Dragon. It was cautious and quick to run, but that did not equal being weak.

No surprise. Wild animals would not follow a weak leader. The Huge Pack Dragon had lead up to five hundred dragons, so it was capable of ripping an average soldier to pieces without using its fangs, if it felt like it.

"GRRR!"

And right now, the Huge Pack Dragon was totally up for it.

It only feared an organized group of humans. When a single human faced it head-on, the Huge Pack Dragon had not such a low self-esteem to fear her.

But the absence of fear in the female soldier was in no way inferior to the dragon.

“The mighty ‘Sorceress Skathi’ is rumoured to have slain an evil black dragon all by herself. As the successor to her name, I must at least be able to take out a mere dragon, or I will not be able to face His Majesty again after he bestowed the name ‘Skathi’ onto me.”

Saying that, the female warrior aka. Skathi pointed the short spear in her hands straight at the Huge Pack Dragon.

“GRAH!”

Although Skathi was exceptional tall for a woman, she was still no match for the dragon. Most likely, the Huge Pack Dragon only considered the height difference between a normal woman and Skathi as a “variance of error”.

The ground shook a bit as the Huge Pack Dragon approached and Skathi was completely covered by its shadow. But the woman from the North Continent showed not the slightest sign of disturbance.

On the contrary, she quickly confronted the approaching dragon and suddenly swung the spear in her hands to the side.

“GYA!?”

Suffering a vertical wound at the chest, the Pack Dragon turned furious and exerted its two short front legs like crazy.

Needless to say, it was a plain attack without any tricks. But therein lay hidden a destructive strength that not even a broadsword swung at full power by a trained soldier could attain.

Skathi stopped that very attack with her spear.

Well, she did not exactly stop it. Instead, she skilfully deviated the attack at the right timing and angle with her spear, when the claws came down on her from above.

While she did that, she did not retreat a single step backwards.

“What strength. As expected of a dragon.”

Going by her words alone, it sounded like she was wary of the attack from the dragon, but in reality, she stood in front of the Huge Pack Dragon and brushed off its attack head-on.

Moreover, she did not stay on a one-sided defence. With every two attacks from the claws of the Huge Pack Dragon, Skathi used her spear for an offensive as well, albeit only once.

And while she deviated all the attacks from the dragon, she managed to cut the thick skin of the dragon with every swing of her spear, making it spill deep red blood.

The green plain was dyed red in no time with the viscous blood of the Pack Dragon.

“GII!”

The Huge Pack Dragon raised a voice of anger as the battle did not go as expected. These kind of wounds were still no threat to it, but the Huge Pack Dragon was frustrated about the fact that none of his attacks connected while it one-sidedly was cut up, so it forgot its long-standing experience and went on the full offensive.

“GRR… GUU!”

The Huge Pack Dragon stopped attacking with its claws as if to boast that she would no longer be able to deviate them, and struck out at Skathi with its large body this time.

And certainly, not even Skathi could stop or deviate its attack now. But she made no exaggerated evasive moves.

“Now.”

Knowing that the charging Huge Pack Dragon could not make any small turns, the female warrior took a small sidestep to the right. They passed by each other at such a close distance that the left leg of the dragon barely bruised the right shoulder of Skathi.

Needless to say, Skathi did not choose such a risky evasion just for fun.

“Hah!”

In the very moment they passed by each other, she single-handed swung her spear diagonally upwards.

Along with the shrill sound of metal, the tip from the long tail of the Huge Pack Dragon was cut off.

“GYAA!?”

The cut-off part was not really all that long, not even ten centimetre. But losing a part of its body certainly caused an intense pain for the Huge Pack Dragon.

The dragon screamed so loud that any timid person would have fainted just from hearing it.

Of course Skathi was the complete opposite of timid: She was an Amazon.

Forget about even flinching from the scream, Skathi became even more offensive as if jumping at a “chance”.

“GYA! GI, GIGI!”

And then the same procedure as before repeated itself. The Huge Pack Dragon flung its front legs and Skathi made precise counterattacks while parrying its attacks.

On a closer look, the ratio of attacking and defending was even inclining in favour of Skathi.

Earlier she had thrusted her spear once for every two claw attacks from the dragon, but now, she managed to swing her short spear once for every attack from the Huge Pack Dragon.

Naturally, the fact that Skathi deviated all the attacks from the Huge Pack Dragon and hit it with all of her attacks, did not change.

The difference from before was the cut-off tail.

For any animals with a tail, not just dragons, the tail always fulfilled the important role of balancing out their bodies.

That was even more so the case for two-legged animals like the Pack Dragon, so it naturally affected its movements, when the pivot of its balance was cut off, even if it only was a ten centimetre part from the tip.

The Huge Pack Dragon might get over the disability with time, but Skathi was obviously not giving it that time.

“GYA, GYA, GYAA!”

As the Huge Pack Dragon continuously attacked at random without success, its screams gradually sounded more rushed.

Skathi diverted the claws coming from above with the spear head of her short spear and even added an attack, when the Huge Pack Dragon showed an opening.

Her attacks were limited to shallow slashes. A thrust with the spear or a deep slash for more damage, came with the risk of

getting stuck. The situation would reverse in an instant, if she were to take even one hit. No matter how advantageous she got, the seasoned female warrior never forgot that fact.

Even small wounds sped up the loss of blood, if there were enough of them. The battleground had already turned into a red puddle from the body fluids of the Huge Pack Dragon.

If Skathi were to trip in that viscous red puddle, the battle would turn out differently, but she had foreseen this development from the very beginning, so she wore special made shoes that had short nails worked into the soles.

Even in a pool of slippery blood, these nails pierced into the ground beneath it and stabilized her footing, making it almost impossible to slip.

“GYAA!”

Anger turned into impatience, impatience into timidness and the timidness finally turned into fear.

This little creature was strong. Even just one of it was stronger than itself.

The Huge Pack Dragon realized that fact all too late. And hesitation came along with that realization.

“GII!”

No matter how intelligent it had gotten, the Huge Pack Dragon still felt no manlike emotions like shame or honour, so it turned on its heels and quickly ran towards the thick forest at full speed.

It was more sluggish than before, because of the blood loss and damage to its tail, but it was still a lot faster than a human in full sprint.

At this rate, all the effort to corner it would be in vain, when it escaped.

But even now, Skathi still showed no sign of worry on her face.

Her unchanged cold eyes looked at the back of the escaping Huge Pack Dragon while Skathi gripped her short spear near the spear head, raised it to her face and chanted.

'Grant me a flame that even burns the ground. As compensation, I make one hundred and eight offerings of magical power to the fire spirit.'

The chant took effect immediately. The spear head of the short spear in Skathi's hand was engulfed in a bright red flame.

Any spectator would surely be astonished again by the audaciousness and calmness Skathi exhibited.

Because it was that difficult to evoke magic on the battlefield.

Evoking magic required the "correct intonation", the "correct amount of magical power" and the "correct perception". The problematic part from evoking magic on a battlefield was the "correct perception".

Although it was only for a brief moment, one had to completely bear the "magic in its activated state" in mind in order to evoke it.

In that state, you were quite vulnerable. Frankly speaking, you quasi fell into a "deep microsleep" that left you almost completely defenceless on the battlefield.

Moreover, you deliberately had to assume that vulnerable demeanour. A normal person could not help but worry about its own situation, thus failing to completely focus on it.

But it seemed to be no challenge for Skathi in particular.

Once she confirmed that the magic had activated correctly, she grabbed the spear burning at the tip with both hands, resting it on her shoulders behind her head.

Then she started to spin on the spot. One step, two steps, three steps. After exactly three steps, she had made a complete turn and used the motion of that spin to launch the short spear after the fleeing Huge Pack Dragon.

It was more like a discus throw than a javelin throw. Furthermore, her motion did not stop at that. Right before releasing the spear from her hands, she made another half a turn with her right foot, kicking the end of the flying spear in a backwards roundhouse kick motion.

Accelerated from the spin, the spear was further sped up by the kick at the end and swiftly darted at the Huge Pack Dragon.

The discus throw certainly raised more momentum than a normal javelin throw, not to mention the kick at the end. But that throwing technique naturally sacrificed some accuracy.

Still, that worry was of no concern to the superhuman female warrior, either.

“GII!?”

The spear launched by Skathi pierced the head of the Huge Pack Dragon faithfully.

It easily penetrated the thick skin and even thicker skull and perfectly struck the inside of the head.

That alone was hardly ever lethal, since dragons had a relatively small brains, but it had been no ordinary spear.

The tip of the spear was burning with a magical flame.

That flame ignited the inside of the head, toasting the brain.

“G… GUU…”

The Huge Pack took one last step toward the thick forest and at the end of its tether, it collapsed on the spot with a dull thud noise.

“Seems I finished it off alright.”

Finally softening her facial expression, the female warrior casually strolled over to the Huge Pack Dragon she had just killed herself. Just in case, she drew and held the curved sword from her waist in her right hand. It was typical of Skathi that she stayed cautious at all times.

But before she could reach the corpse of the Huge Pack Dragon, there came rustling sounds from within the thick forest and in the next moment, several silhouettes approached the Pack Dragon.

“Wow, she really killed that ridiculous huge land dragon all by herself.”

“That’s our Victoria-sama! Common sense doesn’t apply to her.”

“Is she really a woman?”

“You mean, is she actually human?

It were the soldiers from the “Yellow Leaves” that had hidden in the forest by order of Skathi.

Even Skathi had not been so arrogant to guarantee for sure that she was able to kill the Huge Pack Dragon all by herself.

Therefore she had let the men hide in the forest to cut off its escape while the Pack Dragon was distracted by the single combat with her.

Needless to say, she would have given a signal at once, if the Huge Pack Dragon was beyond her strength, and tackled it together with the help of these men.

Fortunately enough, it turned out to be an unnecessary worry. But that only became apparent in hindsight.

Skathi had not the slightest intentions to bite the dust and leave her sworn princess behind in this foreign country.

When she arrived at the corpse of the Huge Pack Dragon, she picked up some stones lying on the ground and threw them at the still opened eyes of the dragon just in case.

Seeing as there was no reaction, Skathi could be sure that it was really dead, so she put a foot on the ridiculous huge head of the dragon and drew out her beloved short spear.

“Fuh!”

Although the spear was stuck in the hard skull, Skathi had no trouble pulling it out, because of her outstanding strength and skills.

The thick and warm cerebrospinal fluid spilled out from the resulting hole.

“Guess it needs some sharpening again.”

Skathi quickly got away, so that the fluid did not get on her feet, and mumbled that, when she looked at the tip of the spear she had pulled out.

Even the magnificent spear made from the tusk of a Sea Elephant needed some maintenance after the fight to the death with the Huge Pack Dragon.

“I just hope I can get a good replacement until its done.”

Muttering to herself, Skathi then looked at her subordinates for the first time and said with a small smile.

“Okay, roll call. If everyone’s present, we’re going back. The princess is waiting for our report.”

The soldiers completely trusted Skathi, even though she was a much better soldier than them despite being a woman.

“Aye~”

“Roger!”

“Understood!”

Although their answers were not in unison, the robust men obediently followed the female warrior and left the place.

* * *

While Xavier eliminated the main force of the Pack Dragons and Skathi defeated the Huge Pack Dragon in single combat, the other forces under the command of Zenjirou stood by for any emergencies in some place far away from the battlefield.

To be honest, the term stand-by was only for show and in reality, they were actually set apart from the battlefield.

Of course Zenjirou himself was aware of that fact more than anyone and was not even discontent about it. If anything, he was grateful that he ended up having nothing to do, considering what would happen if a real emergency actually were to take place.

The reason he had deployed in name only was completely political. From a practical perspective, he was nothing but a hindrance.

Hence Zenjirou felt a bit small in the presence of the girl standing next to him, who he had made play along with his political scheme.

Dressed in a leather armour that suited him even less than the official attire, he called out to Princess Freya next to him.

“Are you okay, Princess Freya? If you are tired, I can get you a chair.”

The princess from the Uppsala Kingdom smiled gracefully in response to his concern.

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty Zenjirou. But please do not mind me.”

She answered him like that with a more practised expression than him.

Even if the chance of Pack Dragons coming all the way here was pretty low, it was still far more dangerous here than inside the city of Valentia.

Still unable to shake off his anxiety, Zenjirou asked Princess Freya a silly question in order to distract himself.

“You appear to be rather calm. Could it be, you are quite accustomed to situations like this one?”

His question seemed to come as a surprise to her, though, since she widened her ice-blue eyes.

“No, not at all. It is my first time lying in wait like this. So, to be honest with you, I am rather excited. Did I really appear that calm to you?”

“Well, what can I say? You are more spirited than you look…”

He could have related to it, if she had said nervous, but excited? She was one hell of a princess.

Princess Freya showed an elegant smile on her white face, which showed no signs of tanning even under the sun of the South Continent.

“But I have to say, who would have thought that you really tamed land dragons here? I have heard the stories, but seeing them with my own eyes really impressed me.”

While she said that, she looked at the “Raptorial Dragons” ridden by the knights.

“Are dragons rare on the North Continent?”

The casual question from Zenjirou was met with an honest answer from Princess Freya.

“Yes. We really have very few land dragons living on our continent. Although dragons per se are not that rare, since our seas are filled with Sea Dragons as well.”

“I see now. Unlike the continents, the sea is one big continuous environment after all.”

“Indeed. That is why waterways on the North Continent are said to be so much more dangerous than the land routes. In reality, though, it is not all that dangerous anymore these days thanks to the advance in ships and sea travel.”

It happened while Zenjirou had such a casual chat with Princess Freya.

“Master Zenjirou.”

In command of this unit in place of Zenjirou, who was nothing but baggage in this operation, Raffaelo Márguez approached him.

Maybe Zenjirou just imagined it, but his smile looked brighter than usual.

“What‘s up, Raffaelo?”

Asked curtly like that, Raffaelo broke the goods news to him with a bright smile.

“Just now, the unit of Sir Xavier and the unit of Victoria-sama have finished their missions almost simultaneous.

Sir Xavier has engaged the main force of the Pack Dragons and pretty much wiped them out without any causalities.

Likewise, Victoria-sama has engaged the Huge Pack Dragon at a different location and defeated it.”

Zenjirou could not hold back his delight at the long-awaited report.

“Oh! They did it!”

“Congratulations, Your Majesty Zenjirou.”

On the other hand, Princess Freya congratulated him on it with a composed smile, as she had expected this outcome.

“Thank you. It is thanks to your cooperation, too. Your guards are truly excellent warriors.”

From the earlier report, Zenjirou had misunderstood that the whole unit from Skathi defeated the Huge Pack Dragon rather than Skathi by herself, so he spoke praise like that.

“Thank you very much. I am sure she, too, will be pleased to hear that.”

Princess Freya however had been told in advance that it would be a single combat, but she dared not to clear up the misunderstanding and simply laughed it away with a polite smile.

She was sure that her trusted retainer had defeated the Huge Pack Dragon one on one, but Skathi had mentioned that she

would “immediately call the others for help if things looked grim”. It would shame Skathi later on, if she carelessly assumed wrong facts now.

“Your Majesty Zenjirou, Your Highness Freya. As I reported, the battle is now over. I know it comes at a short notice, but I would like to depart for Valentia at once. Do you mind?“

Raffaelo asked that and Zenjirou did not object, of course.

“Not at all. We can move out as soon as the preparations are done.”

“Yes. According to the report from Sir Xavier’s unit, very few Pack Dragons escaped here and there. I am sure these dragons will flee into the forest for now, but we are better safe than sorry.”

“Indeed.”

A cold shiver ran down his spine, when Zenjirou heard the explanation from Raffaelo. The city of Valentia was located between them and the battlefield, where Xavier and his men had engaged the main force of the Pack Dragons, so it was close to impossible that the scattered surviving dragons would come here, but Zenjirou just not felt comfortable in his skin, when he it was brought to his attention once again.

Raffaelo probably noticed his unrest.

“Rest assured, Master Zenjirou. Even in the unlikely event that the Pack Dragons come all the way here, we will be able to take care of a dozen of them.”

He smiled at Zenjirou with these words.

“I know!”

Zenjirou answered a bit overhasty, as he somehow sensed that he was seen through.

Zenjirou was a surpassing slow walker and could not even ride a Raptorial Dragon, so Raffaelo had prepared a dragon carriage drawn by two Raptorial Dragons. The relative small carriage was originally intended for four people, but right now, it only carried three.

Namely: Princess Freya, Zenjirou, and his attendant, the waiting maid Ines.

Zenjirou sat next to Princess Freya while Ines sat across from them.

Riding the carriage was admittedly better than walking, but it had no proper suspension, so it was by no means a comfortable ride, when it ran over an unsealed plain.

If you were not careful, you could bite your tongue. Zenjirou had experienced that painful fact first hand, so he refrained from speaking inside the carriage.

For that reason, the dragon carriage advanced in complete silence. Not really bothered by his behaviour, Princess Freya added to the silence by keeping her mouth shut of her own will as well, but that only made it even more awkward.

The silent passage continued for a while. When they had covered about half of the distance, the dragon carriage came to a halt.

“What’s going on?”

Zenjirou spoke again inside the stopped carriage after a long time and Princess Freya answered him.

“I guess we are taking a small break? The soldiers will have to answer the call of nature after all.”

“Oh, right.”

He was convinced, when she mentioned the call of nature.

In short, it was a toilet break.

The soldiers were certainly told to “endure the number one and just leak the number one“ in the midst of a battle, but it distinguished a good commander, when he issued a break like this during a peaceful march.

Needless to say, the mentioned “good commander” did not mean Zenjirou, who was just a figurehead. The effective commander was Raffaelo Márguez.

“I will excuse myself for a bit as well, Master Zenjirou.”

Saying that, the waiting maid Ines stood up from her seat across from him, but Zenjirou was not that insensible to ask her for the reason now.

“Sure.”

He permitted her leave with as few words as possible.

Then it was time to wait.

While Zenjirou waited inside the carriage, he believed to hear boisterous voices outside.

“Did something happen?”

“I wonder? It does seem a bit noisy outside.”

Both, he and Princess Freya, cocked their heads wondering.

Since his body had gotten stiff from sitting inside the carriage for a long time, too, Zenjirou decided to get off for now.

“What’s going on? Did something happen?”

It goes without saying that several soldiers were positioned around his carriage as guards.

The apparently highest ranking soldier of them quickly came running over, when Zenjirou get out of the carriage, and explained with a slightly agitated voice.

“Yes, Milord, your waiting maid has discovered Pack Dragons a moment ago.”

“WHAT!? Is Ines alright!?”

From that reaction, the soldier noticed that his explanation had been insufficient, so he quickly corrected himself.

“Oh, my apologies. I did not explain myself properly. What she found were the corpses of Pack Dragons. They were apparently already dead, when she found them. There are a total of three corpses lying near by.”

Needless to say, Ines was a woman and could not do her business in the same place as the soldiers. In search for a place, where no soldier could see her, she had gone further afar and discovered the corpses of three Pack Dragons.

The soldier reasoned that the Pack Dragons had barely escaped with their lives after they were wounded in the battle against Xavier’s troops, but succumbed to their grave injuries after coming this far.

“I see. Thanks for the report.“

Assured of Ines’ safety, Zenjirou replied to the soldier like that while he, too, headed over to where the noisy onlookers had gathered.

Although he had heard that she was unhurt, he was still a bit worried about Ines, considering the woman had discovered the corpses all by herself. And he also wanted to see the reason for

all the ruckus in the country with his own eyes, even if only as a corpse.

“Ah, please wait, Master Zenjirou!”

Flanked by the guards that hastily followed after him, Zenjirou went over to the scene to find the waiting maid Ines standing in a large circle of soldiers that had turned into onlookers.

“Ines.”

When he called out to her, the crowd of onlookers split.

“Oh, Master Zenjirou. It seems I was a cause of worry to you. Many apologies.”

Ines lowered her head deeply with these words. As far as he could tell, there was nothing wrong with her.

“No, as long as you are all right. Must have been tough. Are you hurt?”

While saying that, Zenjirou looked at “it” lying behind Ines.

“No. I was surprised and dirtied my clothes a bit, but fortunately, I am not hurt.”

Just like she had said, red bloodstains could be seen here and there on the hem of her long skirt, on her chest and in her hair.

“I see. Better get a change of clothes, when we are back in Valentia.”

Although he replied like that, his attention was no longer on Ines.

(So this is a Pack Dragon…!)

Overwhelmed by the first sight of a carnivore dragon, albeit dead, Zenjirou was actually the shocked one.

It was not all that much bigger than a “Raptorial Dragon”, but the biggest difference were its front leg claws and fangs.

The claws were as long as his upper arm and the longest and thickest fang was even bigger than his palm.

On a closer look, all three dragons had deep vertical cuts at their “throats”. The wound was so deep that any normal animal would have died immediately without even being able to utter a death cry.

The Pack Dragons had fled all the way from the battlefield up to here with this kind of wound?

Apparently, the will to live from wild dragons was way beyond Zenjirou’s ken.

Looking at the dead dragons like this, he suddenly realized something.

(Oh, I declared a battlefield with a hundred of these monster as ‘barely risky’ and walked out against all opposition.)

Never mind that he had guards, he finally recognized what an outrageous thing he had done. His mind went black, his feet and hands turned cold and his heart skipped a beat.

He had to admit that he had admittedly understood the danger of this world in theory, but had not experienced it physically so far. Governor Damian had been a faithful subject without doubt. It might prove to be difficult to apologize to him face-to-face as royalty, but he wanted to reward him in some kind of way for his warning.

(I won’t ever do something this stupid again. I will never leave the city walls again, even if it causes a political disgrace or trouble for Aura.)

As the Prince Consort, Zenjirou vowed that to himself and that very vow might turn out to be the biggest achievement from the Pack Dragon Subjugation.

Epilogue

Seven days later.

In the residence of the Count of Valentia stood a personality superior to Zenjirou.

There was currently only one person in the Carpa Kingdom with an higher status than the Prince Consort, namely Queen Aura.

Initially, it had been arranged that Zenjirou would return to the Capital in the prepared dragon carriages with all the others, but apparently even Queen Aura had been astonished by the detailed report of the “Pack Dragon Subjugation” delivered by the Small Flying Dragon in advance.

To such an extent that she was even willing to use up all three possible applications of the “Teleport Magic” for one day.

Having leapt to Valentia with that Teleport Magic, Queen Aura was first greeted by Raffaelo Márguez.

“My, my, Your Majesty. This is a rather sudden visit.”

The former husband candidate of the Queen seemed to have anticipated this development to some extent as he simply widened his eyes a bit in surprise, but showed no further surprise, when he greeted the Queen with a smile.

“I am here for unofficial business. After taking my husband, I shall leave again at once, so do not waste your breath.”

“Yes, very well. Then allow me to walk you to Master Zenjirou.”

Saying this, Raffaelo immediately went off to lead Aura.

“Good.”

The pair advanced along the floor of the residence of the Count of Valentia with a slightly faster pace than normal.

Before long, they arrived in front of Zenjirou's room, where a middle-aged waiting maid wearing carmine red maid clothes graciously seized her skirt and did a curtsy.

"Welcome, Your Majesty Aura. Master Zenjirou is waiting inside."

"Good. I heard you 'helped out' my husband quite a bit. You have my thanks."

"It was a pleasure."

As Ines and Aura exchanged a hushed greeting, Raffaelo bowed once with the words "I will excuse myself now" after he had Aura guided so far, and left the place.

"Wait, Raffaelo. You seem to have done great as well, so thank you, too."

"You are giving me too much credit. The 'wise judgment' from Master Zenjirou has aided me the whole time."

With these words, Raffaelo disappeared from the view of Aura.

"…Tch."

Her face distorted somewhat displeased, when Raffaelo called Zenjirou "wise", but there was no time to concern herself with that right now, so she faced the door of her husband's room anew.

Aura winked at Ines, whereupon the maid replied with "understood" and ably knocked the door twice, calling in.

"Master Zenjirou. Your 'escort' is here. May I let her in?"

A slightly doubtful voice answered from beyond the door.

“My escort? Who could it be? Oh well, yeah, let her in.”

Upon his reply, Ines slowly opened the door and Aura entered the room at the same time.

The royal couple met face-to-face. In order not to bother them, Ines closed the door from the outside.

“Eh, no way. Aura!? Why!?”

Zenjirou uttered in surprise.

“Ines just told you. I am here to pick you up. I do not have much time, so I am going to ‘leap’ you right away.”

Right after her declaration, a boisterous clattering could be heard.

“Eh? Leap me? Now? Wait a sec. I haven’t packed my stuff yet.”

“Just take what is absolutely necessary. The rest will be transported to the Capital in the carriages with Ines and the others.”

“O- Okay. Just a moment. Uhm, my change of clothes, my flashlight… Huh? Where’s my pocket knife?”

“You ready? Good. I am going to leap you. ‘Send my chosen person to…’”

“Wha– Already? I’m not ready yet!”

Soon the voices had vanished from the room.

Once the room had fell completely silent, Ines waited for a bit longer, then knocked the door lightly and opened the door a tiny crack, peeking inside.

“Master Zenjirou? Your Majesty?”

Although she called out to them, there was no reply.

The scent and warmth of a person still lingered inside the room as if to emphasise that someone had lived in there until a moment ago, but its inhabitant had suddenly vanished.

“It seems they have returned without a hitch.”

Ines walked into the room that had suddenly become deserted and said that with a soft smile.

* * *

The return was just as sudden as the arrival. He could not fathom the distance between the Capital and Valentia like that.

Practically abducted by his wife, Zenjirou had returned to the Capital, but apparently Aura had spoken the truth, when she said that she had no time, since she headed to the Royal Palace as soon as she had leapt Zenjirou into the Inner Palace. As a result, they could only have a proper meeting once the sun had completely set.

“Puh, it goes without saying, but home sweet home!”

Enjoying a meal and bath in the Inner Palace after a long time, Zenjirou slovenly sat down in the couch in the living room while wearing a comfortable pyjama.

The six LED floor lamps bathed the living room into a bright white light.

Even at night, he drank a cold fruit drink from the refrigerator inside the bright room.

Since he had been separated from this room for a while, the convenience of an electrical powered room really captured his heart.

Having said this, it was not the time for relaxation only. His beloved wife— Queen Aura said across him and they needed to have a talk.

Seeing her after a long time, his wife was still as charming as ever.

When he looked at his wife in her negligee-like red nightgown from close up, he wanted to toss away the troublesome discussion and head straight to the bedroom, but the bitter fate of royalty did not allow for that.

He should just get over with the bothersome stuff in a jiff and buy time for some happy, embarrassing and fun quality time between them.

Resolved like that, Zenjirou corrected his slovenly sitting posture by straightening his back and faced Aura across him at eye-level.

“Okay, let’s get started.”

“Yes. First off, explain yourself. Just what has happened? What prompted you to leave the city walls and lead the army yourself? Please tell me the details.”

As she accused him like that, her expression was stern and looked like she was suppressing a strong emotion.

This matter could not be laughed off with a joke. Zenjirou had never intended to do that anyway, but in face of that very reality, he, too, put on an unprecedented stern expression and started to talk.

“Well, where do I start? The matter with Princess Freya and the Pack Dragon Subjugation are basically two different things, but they do overlap each other a little bit. Well, at the beginning…”

Like that, he initiated the quite long explanation.

"…Although it were only corpses, I finally realized what danger I had put myself in, when I saw them. So, I think that covers everything."

One and a half hour had passed by the time Zenjirou finished talking about all his experiences in Valentia.

"I see."

At first, Aura had listened to him with a somewhat accusing look, but over time, her expression had gradually changed and when she heard that he had already put Raffaelo Márguez "in charge of the Pack Dragon Subjugation" by the time she sent Xavier Guzzle to Valentia, she had turned completely pale in the face.

Nevertheless, she regained her composure after a bit of time and calmly listened to the end, as it was expected of a Queen.

"Yeah, that's the gist of it. Back then, I was the fully authorized representative while you temporarily lost your authority as the Countess of Valentia, right? So I thought it would be bad, if I just followed your instructions blindly. Don't tell me I was overthinking it?"

Zenjirou asked timidly, whereupon Aura shook her head with an inexpressive look.

"No, you did the right thing without doubt. If you had done like I said, namely dismissing Raffaelo Márguez and appointed Xavier Guzzle instead, I would have definitely been put through the meat grinder by the feudal lords later on."

"I see. Good to know."

Zenjirou smiled a bit happily, when Aura told him that his own decision came more or less in her favour.

“But I’m just the Prince Consort while you’re the Queen, so I thought it would be bad, too, to ignore your instructions in its entirety. The only thing I could come up with after I took your orders and Raffaelo’s prior appointment into consideration as much as possible, was that I had to be the top dog.

I’m sorry that I did something so stupid and caused you trouble.”

When her husband lowered his head ahead of time, Aura shook her head wordlessly.

“No… I should be the one to apologize. You sacrificed yourself to make up for a mistake of mine.”

In fact, the matter would have definitely escalated into something even more troublesome, if he had chosen anything else but putting himself at the top.

If he had put Xavier in charge like Aura had wanted, the feudal lords would not have stayed quiet about it like she had mentioned earlier. And if he had completely ignored her instructions instead and left Raffaelo in charge, Aura would have ended up breaking her promise with Xavier. Since Marquis Guzzle was backing Xavier, there was no way he would simply accept that and depending on the circumstances, Aura would have had to punish Zenjirou in some kind of way.

Of course the countermeasure from Zenjirou was not completely flawless, but it was still a lot less harmful than the previous mentioned instances.

It was definitely a masterstroke from Zenjirou.

But Aura spoke to her husband with a serious expression, despite acknowledging that.

“Still, listen up. Never do something like this again. Yes, you did the right thing this time. You achieved the best conceivable outcome. I do thank you for that.

But if you expose yourself to danger in the progress, it would still be more acceptable that I admit having made a mistake or that a political unrest takes place in the country.”

She was definitely not saying that from just a sentimental point of view. At the present time, Zenjirou was the only grown-up male that had inherited the bloodline magic, so his life was truly this important.

A political blunder could always be corrected later on and even if the lords were causing some ruckus, they would calm down in time. But if Zenjirou were to die, the Carpa Kingdom would fall at least one generation behind its great goal of expanding the royal family.

The practical reason aside, Zenjirou became painfully aware of the fact how much his wife cared about his wellbeing, so he had no choice but to obediently nod in agreement.

“Okay, I get it. I’ll never do it again.”

“Good. I hope so.”

“…”

“…”

For a while, silence prevailed.

It was up to Zenjirou to break that silence.

“On a different note, the trade negotiations with Princess Freya went well, or should I say acceptable?”

Thinking back on it now, Zenjirou had originally gone to Valentia to deal with the princess that had come over from the

North Continent. Overshadowed by the ruckus with the Pack Dragons in the latter half, that purpose had faded a bit into the background, but unlike the resolved dragon incident, the negotiations with the princess would only start for real from now on.

“Hmm, an intercontinental trade treaty with a country from the Northern Continent that has no connections to any other countries on the South Continent. That sounds indeed promising. And I take it that you also managed to get involved with the repair of the ship, like we had planned?

I need to consult an expert about it first, but if everything goes well, we might even be able to already start building large sailing ships by ourselves in my regency.”

Saying that, Aura completely changed the prior look in her eyes to an ambitions one.

“Well, this is just my impression, but I think that Princess Freya is no ordinary princess, so better be careful. I get the feeling she’ll pull us over the barrel, if we get careless.”

Zenjirou did not miss out on warning her like that.

On the surface, Princess Freya certainly appeared like the typical elegant and friendly princess. But considering that she had set out on an intercontinental travel by her own choice, she definitely was anything but normal.

She herself had claimed that she wanted to enrich her homeland through the intercontinental trade, but it remained to be seen if that was really her only motivation. They had no means to tell if she had any ulterior motives like exploiting them for the sake of her own country.

“Hmm, okay. I will be careful. Still, she gave you some livestock called ‘goats’ in celebration of Carlos’ birth, right? I will have to thank her for that, if I ever meet her.”

“Yes. That’s my biggest achievement this time. Ah, but I left them in Valentia. I need to get them to the Capital somehow.

And I need to find someone to look after them. We don’t have any people in the country that know how to take care of mammals, do we?”

He had heard that it was relatively easy to farm goats, but it surely was not something a complete novice could handle.

As Zenjirou wrecked his brain, Aura answered him with a smile.

“Then I just have to send some people to Princess Freya and have them learn how to take care of them. It is the first time you ever wanted something. I will be glad to lend you a hand.”

“Thanks, Aura!”

She was not lying, when she said she would gladly lend a hand. As a matter of fact, her husband had desired something in particular for the first time, since they had gotten married. As long as it was feasible, Aura wanted to comply with his wish.

“I also made some silica sand and slaked lime from the coast sand and seashells in Valentia. Ines and the others will bring it over, so use it for the glass manufacture, if you want.”

Having said this, the slaked lime had generously been used to erase the scent of the Pack Dragons, so there might not be any left. Aura smiled happily, when Zenjirou told her that.

“Oh, a ’souvenir from Valentia’, if you will so. Great, I am looking forward to it.”

A souvenir from Valentia. These words triggered something within Zenjirou.

“Yeah, do… that… Mh? It feels like I have forgotten something?”

It was the disturbing feeling you got, when you only remembered the fact that you had forgotten something, but not what exactly.

Plagued by that feeling, Zenjirou tilted his head puzzled and tried to remember what he had forgotten.

“Forgotten something? Really? Was it important?”

“Hmm, I wonder? I forgot about that as well. The souvenir you mentioned just seemed to have rung a bell.”

“The souvenir? Do you have someone besides me, whom you are going to give a souvenir to?”

Aura then joked around by saying that having an affair was not allowed and that he should rather take a concubine before cheating on her, but Zenjirou was no longer listening to that part.

“I remember now…”

A pale Zenjirou mumbled with a dry voice.

“The pearl and coral souvenirs for Prince Francesco and Princess Bona!”

Yes. Before his departure, he had promised the prince and princess from the Sharrow Royal Family to bring back some jewellery materials from the port town as souvenirs.

But he had completely forgotten about it once he was there.

“Oh damn. What do I do? It was a promise between royalty! Sorry, Aura, but can you leap me back once more tomorrow?”

“Calm down. You can buy pearls and corals in the Capital, too.”

When Aura comforted him, Zenjirou shot back.

“No way! That would be like buying overseas souvenirs at the Narita Airport! That defeats the purpose of souvenirs!”

“Hey, keep calm. I have no idea what you are talking about. Then just ask Ines or Raffaelo with a Small Flying Dragon to buy them, as they are still there. I cannot use the ‘Teleport Magic’ for something so trivial!”

“Oh god! Even though souvenirs are meant to be bought by the giver at the destination! Forgive me, Prince Francesco, Princess Bona!”

Turning a deaf ear to the perplexed Aura, who tried to reassure him nevertheless, Zenjirou continued to indulge himself in regret and repentance.

Extra Stories about the Waiting Maids and their Master: Special Training

Zenjirou Carpa, formerly known as Zenjirou Yamai, was the Prince Consort to the Queen of the Carpa Kingdom, Aura I, and the master of the Inner Palace.

Ever since his marriage with Aura, Zenjirou had spent every single night in the Inner Palace so far. Lately he had gotten more work in the Royal Palace, so he often spent his day out of the Inner Palace, but at the very least, he never slept in a different bed besides the one in the Inner Palace.

But for the first time now, Zenjirou was going to be away from the Inner Palace for good.

He had gone to Valentia as a representative for Queen Aura.

His stay there would at least last a month. The young waiting maids were gossiping over the absence of their master.

“Maybe we will get a vacation?”

That train of thought was not all that strange. The live-in maids were destined to have no vacation as long as their master stayed in his residence. So it was not really uncommon that they would get a period of rest while their master was away like in this case.

Needless to say, the decision was still up to the master, but their theoretical master Zenjirou was yielding beyond help and

their effective master Queen Aura was known for her reasonable treatment of her subjects, too. Thus it was no surprise that the young waiting maids started to nourish hope.

Supervisory Maid Amanda on the other hand hit upon this idea:

“This is the perfect chance to enforce some regulations that were not possible in the presence of Master Zenjirou.”

On the next day.

All of the waiting maids working in the Inner Palace had gathered in one room of the Inner Palace.

Although the room was quite spacious, it had no decorations and would never be entered by the masters of the Inner Palace, namely Zenjirou and Aura. It was a so-called “backstage room”.

The waiting maids clad in carmine red maid clothes were lining up in that spacious room. With all the eyes of her subordinates on her, Supervisory Maid Amanda began to speak in her usual tone.

“I am sure that everyone already knows about it, but Master Zenjirou has left for the City of Valentia.”

The young waiting maids were listening to the preamble from Supervisory Maid Amanda with a strange tension.

At this point, some of the brighter maids realized that it would not be good news that they were going to be hearing from now on.

Standing in the middle, Supervisory Maid Amanda was flanked by the Department Heads. One of them, the Kitchen Department Head Vanessa, was trying to suppress a bitter smile.

Putting that bitter smile into words, it would mean “my condolences” or “too bad for you”.

Apparently, the following announcement would not concern a “vacation” like the young waiting maids had hoped. Very few of the maids resigned themselves to it while Supervisory Maid Amanda slowly continued.

“I believe this to be a very fortunate opportunity. Our lord, Master Zenjirou is a very lenient man. What he seeks in the Inner Palace is a ‘peaceful place to relax’. For that reason, I, too, have refrained from nagging at you all too much.”

“…..”

An atmosphere that seemed to say “you kidding me!?” settled in between the young waiting maids in reaction to the words from the Supervisory Maid.

But Amanda had spoken the absolute truth.

The young girls might have already forgotten about it, but in the first days of Zenjirou’s entry into the Inner Palace, they had been on the edge very single day, devoting themselves fully to their jobs and careful not to make the slightest mistake.

No matter how hard they tried to hide it, their tension was subtly conveyed to their surroundings.

And Zenjirou was not so dulled that he would perceive it as “comfortable”, when the people around him were stressed like that, even if they did their job perfectly. Needless to say, he did not tell them that “their tension actually made him feel uncomfortable”.

However, Supervisory Maid Amanda was not put in charge of the Inner Palace personally by Queen Aura for nothing. She was an extremely capable maid. Even without her master saying

anything, she could read his wishes in his eyes and grant them before he could utter them. A textbook example of a maid.

After a while, Supervisory Maid Amanda had noticed that Zenjirou was not seeking a “perfect workmanship” from them, but rather a “relaxed environment”, so she had gradually let the reins slacken on the young waiting maids without them noticing. Just so that they could work in peace and did not break down from stress. Supervisory Maid Amanda was actually supposed to be the scariest existence known to the young waiting maids.

Despite this, the young waiting maids were virtually airing their grievances in response to the words of that scary head maid. It was the best proof that the circumstances had turned “lax”. Supervisory Maid Amanda sighed affected, as she had anticipated their reaction, and continued.

“Fortunately enough, Master Zenjirou is pleased with your actions. But your self-awareness and skills as waiting maids of the Inner Palace are slowly dwindling. I cannot overlook that.”

The reactions from the scolded maids were various. Some covered their agape mouths, since it had rung a bell. Some puckered their lips as if to say that it was not true. And the majority of them tilted their heads puzzled with no clue what she was talking about.

Well, it could be understood that they had no clue. In fact, Amanda had never been lax to the point of “pampering” them, and they had done their jobs more than satisfactory.

But they were “waiting maids of the Inner Palace”. Their aspiration was not a satisfactory rating, but rather a perfect one.

Amanda was convinced that it was her responsibility to raise these girls into the best waiting maids. She clapped her hands once, then declared with a clear voice.

“I hereby declare that the time until Master Zenjirou returns, will be used for ‘Special Training’. Are we understood?”

Her sentence ended with a question, but of course, the young waiting maids had no right to object.

“Yes!”

It goes without saying that all of the waiting maids were aware of that fact.

Supervisory Maid Amanda had issued “Special Training”. Every maid of the Inner Palace could not help but harbour fear towards it; some more, some less.

Not to mention Fay, Dolores and Rethe, who were called the “Three Troublemakers” and kept under observation all the time anyway. Appointed to the “cleaning duties”, the three walked down the hallway of the Inner Palace heavily-hearted like livestock that had been sold off.

“Aw, why do we have to be on ‘cleaning duty’ now of all times?”

Fay grumbled and shook her head, so that her short frizzed hair dishevelled.

“Yeah, it’s bad luck.”

Even Dolores, who usually opposed what Fay said, agreed with a darkened voice. The tallest of the waiting maids in the Inner Palace was currently slouching her shoulders, so she looked a handbreadth smaller than usual.

Ines, the actual Department Head for cleaning, had gone with Zenjirou to Valentia, so she was currently replaced by Supervisory Maid Amanda.

Of course it did not mean that the other Department Heads were easy-going, but they were still the better catch compared to the special training from the Supervisory Maid herself.

“Haha, there is nothing we can do about it. But even Mrs. Amanda will acknowledge us, if we do our best.”

Positive in nature, Rethe encouraged her roommates like that, but that encouragement was in vain for Fay and Dolores.

“Not happening, Rethe. It’s Mrs. Amanda we’re talking about.”

“Yeah… She might acknowledge our effort, but the results will get judged separately.”

Dolores made a nice observation. Supervisory Maid Amanda certainly acknowledged their efforts. But effort alone did gain her forgiveness for sloppy results.

“You are working hard every day. Well done. Now think about what you have to do in order to make that effort meaningful.”

That was her motto. Effort in itself was praiseworthy, but was not affecting the final evaluation. Moreover, her evaluations were rather strict. Anyway, the young waiting maids would eventually reach their destination, even if they advanced with dejected expressions and heavy steps.

“Damn, we’re here…”

“We have no choice. Well then, you ready?”

“Yeah, let us give our best.”

Standing in front of the living room, the three of them somehow pulled themselves together and knocked on the door to the living room determined.

“Then let us begin. First off, clean the room like always. Then we will give special attention to the carpet. It is such a good opportunity to do so.”

Supervisory Maid Amanda uttered that without ceremony, whereupon the Three Troublemakers already contorted their faces despite the fact that they had only entered the room a moment ago.

Even for the experienced waiting maids in the Inner Palace, it was the quite tedious task to clean the carpet.

They had to forcefully scrub the entirety of the incredible large carpet with a wrung out wiping cloth to remove any dust or hair that had gotten entangled in the carpet.

By the way, the size of the living room was nothing as sweet as thirty to forty square metre. Needless to say, the carpet did not cover the whole room, but in terms of surface area, it was about half as large as the living room.

It was still large enough to make you dizzy, when you considered the effort it took to scrub all that with just a wiping cloth.

Amanda actually wanted the room to be cleaned in every nook and corner every day, but unfortunately, Zenjirou spent most of his time in the living room, so the allocated time for cleaning was quite limited. Due to that, they usually just swept the floor and wiped the dirty spots that struck the eye.

So it was no surprise that Supervisory Maid was excited about such an opportunity, where Zenjirou was outside the home.

“Then please get started.”

“Sure.”

Of course none of the young waiting maids dared to object the order from the elated head maid.

Almost two hours later.

“Good, that will do.”

By the time Supervisory Maid Amanda clapped her hands with these words, Fay, Dolores and Rethe felt like collapsing face down onto the carpet.

“M- My arms…”

“My hips…”

“Hah, Hah, Huu…”

The three troublemakers had large scarves wrapped around their heads, so that no hair would drop onto the carpet, and were already completely exhausted from just cleaning the carpet in a long time.

Right then, Supervisory Maid Amanda peppered them with cold words.

“Have you forgotten already? In the beginning, when you had been appointed as waiting maids for the Inner Palace, you got this job done a lot easier. It shows how much you have lost your touch.”

It goes without saying that the waiting maids had moved into the Inner Palace before Zenjirou. Back then, they had done cleaning of this level every day.

Now that she had mentioned it, they certainly got the impression that they had been so obsessed with performing their tasks to perfection that they did not even have the time to complain or whine.

Compared to that time, they could definitely not argue with her now, when she claimed that they had “lost their touch”.

“…..”

Say what you want about Fay and the others, but they still possessed the bare minimum of self-awareness as waiting maids, so they reflected on their behaviour on a rare occasion.

Supervisory Maid Amanda could read in the expressions of the trouble-making girls that her words had not fallen on deaf ears, so she spoke with a slightly more relaxed look.

“One day, you will leave the Inner Palace and return to your families. There marriage will await you and besides your family name, you will put forth the title of a ‘former waiting maid of the Inner Palace’. I cannot have you forget that fact.”

“Yes, my apologies, Mrs. Amanda. You are absolutely right.”

Dolores, the cleverest of the three, lowered her head with a solemn face as their representative.

A moment later, Fay and Rethe copied her.

Their refined bows were truly the performance of a waiting maid.

On a related note, Supervisory Maid Amanda had spoken nothing but facts. Unlike the elder maids such as herself and

the other department heads, the young waiting maids had a temporary appointment in the Inner Palace.

That had nothing to do with the whims of their employer Aura, but rather with the concern for the employed maids.

The profession of a waiting maid of the Inner Palace was basically a live-in occupation separated from the rest of the world. In case of the Carpa Kingdom, it was even possible, if not expected, that they became “concubines for their master”, seeing as the Master of the Inner Palace was exceptionally a man.

Due to that, the young waiting maids had to be “young and attractive” as well as “single without lover or betrothed”.

They were spending their “prime time” as woman in the Inner Palace. It was easily conceivable that their later lives would go down the drain, if they were to waste their whole “prime time” in the Inner Palace.

Despite their little flaws, the three girls still had been recommended as waiting maids of the Inner Palace. They knew all too well what their families expected from them.

It was unacceptable to disappoint the Supervisory Maid here. They had the duty to acquire the skills and elegance befitting a “former waiting maid of the Inner Palace”. Fay, Dolores and Rethe clenched their fist with a stern face to pump themselves up.

“Well then, we are going to clean the bedroom next. Master Zenjirou was so kind to allow us to turn on the air conditioning while we work in the bedroom, but that is no excuse to take your time in there on purpose. Understood?”

“…..Yes.”

A moment later however, they already seemed to have lost against the temptation of the air conditioner, seeing as the “Three Troublemakers” slowed down contrary to their reply.

* * *

After a stressful day under the observation from the Supervisory Maid, the Three Troublemakers eased their exhaustion from the day in their own room at night.

“Oh, great. Right there. No, a bit higher… Yeah, you really are only good for your massages.”

“Grr, you damn mountain! This just isn’t fair!”

Dolores lay prone in her underwear and Fay straddled her, giving her a massage on her shoulders and back while she complained like that.

At some point, the three had arranged that they would give each other a massage after a tiring day at work, but Fay was always nagging.

It certainly looked more strenuous for the petite Fay to massage the tall Dolores than the other way around.

Anyway, the three girls sat down on their own beds respectively after they finished with the massages in the dim room with just an oil pan as the light source, and engaged in some enjoyable chit-chat before going to bed.

“But I’ve got to say, Mrs. Amanda’s really intimidating. Just from looking at me in silence, I felt totally pressured!”

Sitting on the bed, Fay dangled her legs while she lamented like that.

“Yeah, that stare of hers is not to be underestimated. In Mrs. Ines‘ case, it feels like she’s ‘watching over’ you, but when Mrs. Amanda does it, it feels more like she’s ‘keeping watch’ on you.”

On the other hand, Dolores sat on a bed with the same height, but her feet properly reached the floor.

Their difference in physique was shown painfully obvious, but fortunately enough, neither of them had a complex about their height, so no unnecessary argument took place.

“I really wish Mrs. Amanda would go a bit easier on us, too.”

“What did you expect, Fay-chan? We did lose our touch.”

Fay puckered her lips dissatisfied, whereas Rethe reprimanded her with a soft smile.

As an honest soul, Rethe had taken the words from Supervisory Maid Amanda to heart and reflected about her own actions.

She certainly got the feeling that they had slacked off lately.

Rethe was actually making an effort to change herself, although it might not show, since she was rather easy-going in body and soul.

But Fay had a different opinion on the matter.

“I know, but our master is Master Zenjirou, right? To be honest, I think he likes us better, when we’re lazy.”

It was an undeniable fact that the “Three Troublemakers” were the first from the waiting maids in the Inner Palace to be accepted by Zenjirou. The reason they caught his eye first was also because they were the very first ones to “mellow the tension”. By that logic, the argument from Fay had a shred of truth.

“But everything has its limit. Besides, Master Zenjirou is not really a normal master, if I may say so. It’s one thing, if you seriously aim to be his concubine, but if not, you better work a bit harder for your image as a waiting maid.

Mrs. Amanda did not say it aloud, but we’re practically learning the ‘necessary skills for a wife-to-be’ here.”

The smart and strict Dolores dismissed the argument from Fay like that.

“Phew, marriage, eh? I haven’t given it any real thought yet.”

Still dangling her legs, Fay lowered her upper body on the bed, falling on her back.

She could walk around in the downtown area of the Capital without looking out of place, but she was a true-born daughter of nobility nevertheless.

When she returned home in the near future, she was prepared to choose a husband from the candidates prepared by her parents.

But she had adopted to her life in the Inner Palace and at some point, she had started to hope that this life would go on forever.

“Well, I can relate. It’s your own marriage, but your father is going to choose your husband, so it feels like none of your business.”

Dolores agreed with Fay and shrugged her slender shoulders.

The Inner Palace was like a separated space. The world seemed to be of no concern to them as long as they lived there, albeit knowing it was only temporary.

“I wish I could stay here forever…”

These involuntary words had spilled from Rethe's mouth and were without doubt her true feelings.

In the future, she would get married for the sake of the family. She had no intention to oppose that, but it was in the nature of man to wish for the fun times to continue forever.

"Not going to happen, Rethe. If you want to stay here that bad, you must make Master Zenjirou fall for you."

When Fay teased her like that, Dolores added to the joke as well.

"Yeah, that's not going to happen, either."

One might think now that she was dispossessing Rethe of any charm as a woman, but the addressed Rethe agreed with it without showing any sign of anger.

"You have a point. I would go as far as to say that no one of us will ever have a chance with Master Zenjirou."

That was not the opinion of Rethe alone, but rather the unanimous consent of the whole Inner Palace. It was just that obvious that Zenjirou was not giving the waiting maids of the Inner Palace any interested glances.

He quickly averted his eyes these days, when he eyeballed the legs extending from the short skirts of the young waiting maids or the cleavage from the working maids by chance, so he was not completely oblivious of the women, but considering that not a single one of them had become his concubine after living under the same roof for more than a year, it was safe to say that the chances were slim.

"Well, yeah."

"If anyone actually had a chance, he would have laid hands on her during the pregnancy of Her Majesty."

Suddenly, they talked elated about the relations with women of their master.

After all, they were adolescence girls, so they had a soft spot for love stories, whether it involved themselves or not.

“Eh? But Her Majesty still slept in the same room during her pregnancy, albeit in a different bed. How was he supposed to bring in another woman like that?”

“Come on! Haven’t you heard about it? Master Zenjirou had suggested that himself. Her Majesty had wanted to sleep in a different room as soon as her pregnancy was confirmed, but Master Zenjirou wanted to sleep at least in the same room, so he had let another bed brought into the bedroom.”

“Whew, Her Majesty sure is loved!”

From the point of view of the waiting maids, both Zenjirou and Aura were good masters worth of their favour, so anecdotes about the affinity between these two were discussed with vigour.

Although the girls of noble birth grew up with the mindset that marriage equalled a political marriage, it did not change the fact that they admired the romance between a man and a woman, especially if it concerned their own workplace. But their view was a bit more relentless than the one from a normal girl, since they perceived a political component within a marriage as only natural.

“Anyway, it’s a good thing that they get along. From what I’ve heard, the work in the palace can really put a strain on their relationship.

If both completely drift apart and agree to live a life of their own, it would still be better than one side desperately trying to

patch up things while the other side just ignores them. That would truly be the worst.

The appealing side will get irritated at the reaction from the partner, whereas the partner will get irritated by the stubborn appeals.

In most cases, that irritation will be vented on attendants like us."

"Oh god…"

"I am so glad Her Majesty and Master Zenjirou get along…!"

The story from Dolores prompted Fay to contort her face in horror and Rethe to heave a big sigh of relief.

"Tell me about it. Ah, but it'll only be a matter of time until a concubine moves in. I guess it won't be as peaceful as now then."

Fay said aloud what she suddenly thought of. She, too, was the daughter of a noble and a waiting maid of the Inner Palace, so she comprehended the situation Zenjirou was in.

The only grown-up male of the country that could use the bloodline magic (and in his twenties even), could not stay monogamous to the Queen forever.

But Dolores, the biggest realist amongst the three, denied that worry from Fay.

"Hmm, I wouldn't be so sure about that. It's a given that Master Zenjirou will take a concubine at some point, but I doubt it'll really affect the atmosphere here for the worse."

"What do you mean, Dolores-chan?"

When Rethe tilted her head puzzled, Dolores presented her own theory.

“I mean, a concubine is just a concubine. The legal wife is still Her Majesty. Do you actually think a concubine could rival her?”

Queen Aura was the embodiment of the term “heroine”. It would definitely be a stiff piece of work for a normal woman to compete against her. The large difference in standing between the “legal wife” and the “concubine” was already a big handicap to begin with.

In addition to that, Aura had an outstanding wit and personality as well as a tight hold on the faithful heart of Zenjirou. She did not provide the concubine with the slightest target, so the reasoning from Dolores was more than warrantable.

“I see. It certainly takes courage to face off against Her Majesty.”

Fay said that convinced, but Rethe still tilted her head, as she was not yet ready to agree with it.

“Eh? But would such a person not vent her irritation on us, too, since she cannot go against Her Majesty?”

It was an understandable worry, but Dolores denied it as well.

“That’s where Master Zenjirou comes into play. Have you forgotten why he took a liking to us first? Or what he dislikes the most?”

Neither Fay, nor Rethe were so stupid to miss all these hints. They discerned what Dolores was getting at.

“Oh?”

“Right. Now I understand.”

Why did Zenjirou took a liking to the “Three Troublemakers”? Because he found it unpleasant to be around people that were all stiff from tension.

The “Three Troublemakers” were thus regarded with favour, because from amongst all the waiting maids in the Inner Palace, they were the most capable of relieving the tension.

There was no way that he would forgive a “concubine, who vented her anger on the waiting maids”, seeing as it would affect the atmosphere in the Inner Palace for the worse.

“Okay, but what kind of person would his concubine be then?”

Fay and Dolores looked at each other, when Rethe asked innocently.

It certainly was an interesting question.

The woman would have been able to accept her role as a concubine without venting her anger on the waiting maids, knowing that all the affection from Zenjirou was directed at Queen Aura.

It would need a saint for that.

“I guess even Master Zenjirou would be attracted to her, if such an admirable woman actually existed.”

“Aren’t we going around in circles?”

The three young waiting maids continue to talk about love deep into the night.

* * *

On the next day. Fay, Dolores and Rethe were cleaning the living room just like yesterday.

They did the dusting with a feather duster, wiped the table with a wet wiping cloth and swept the floor with a long broom.

The three of them worked as busy as a bee, but Dolores was a little bit more at ease than yesterday, so she noticed that Supervisory Maid Amanda was sometimes glancing suspiciously to the side.

(What's going on?)

While cleaning the higher spots with the feather duster due to her height, Dolores asked herself at heart.

She got nothing but a bad feeling, when the passionate and strict head maid was shifting her attention away from them during the "special training", and that premonition came true right away.

"Girls, you are dropping behind more than a minute as compared to yesterday. Pull yourselves together."

Saying that, Supervisory Maid Amanda looked at the "digital table clock" standing in the corner of the room.

"!? Yes, my apologies."

It was impressive how Dolores could respond at once despite her surprise.

"Eh?"

"Fueh?"

Fay and Rethe on the other hand raised dumbfounded voices without knowing what was going on, pausing their hands.

"What is the matter? You have stopped working."

“Ah, right!”

“I am sorry!”

The two of them hastily resumed their tasks, but they were surely a surprised mess inside.

Dusting the top of the shelf, Dolores listened to the fast beat of her own heart.

(Mrs. Amanda checked the clock?)

She could not believe what she had seen, but it was reality.

Until just recently, the Three Troublemakers were supposed to be the only waiting maids that could read the “Arabic numerals” and thus the time, because they had the portable game console. But apparently that knowledge had spread to Supervisory Maid Amanda as well.

It was an alarming issue for Dolores and the others.

(Oh God! Her supervision will only get more meticulous from now on!)

Unfortunately, her anxiety was spot-on.

* * *

“Aww, this sucks! To think that Mrs. Amanda learned to read the ‘clock’!”

At midday break, Fay rested her head on the table and squealed like a crushed frog.

She was located in one corner of the large kitchen. The waiting maids were taking a quick lunch there.

During the hottest season, the break would entail a midday nap, so most maids just took the food and ate in their own rooms, but the break this time was not that long, so everyone was eating in the kitchen.

“What a blunder. I underestimated her…”

Sitting next to her, Dolores was not laying down like Fay, but her voice was just as gloomy.

Just like she had feared, the cleaning had gotten a tighter schedule from then on.

They had not noticed it yesterday, because they had been engrossed in their tasks, but apparently Supervisory Maid Amanda had literally measured their working pace at minute intervals.

Whenever they slowed down as compared to before, she scolded them with the words “You are slowing down. Yesterday you finished the same work one minute earlier.”, and whenever they did a sloppy job, because they focussed too much on their space, she ordered them to redo it with the words “There is still some dust left. Redo it.”.

The instructions were so strict that they were about to lose heart at the midway point, as it was to be expected from the personal Special Training of Supervisory Maid Amanda.

“Here, you earned your break. Amanda was strict, right? Eat this and prep yourself for the afternoon shift.”

Vanessa, a corpulent middle-aged woman, talked to them in her usual merry voice and put the dishes one after another onto the table.

“Mrs. Vanessa.”

“Th- Thank you so much!”

“Wow! Can we really eat all that!?”

Flatbread baked foxy red, leaf vegetable soup with spices and dragon meat fried in valuable sesame oil.

All of the dishes were emitting hot steam and a rich flavour as if to emphasize that they were freshly made. Normally, the waiting maids got to eat the “staff meals” prepared in the free time between making the food for Zenjirou and Aura, but these dishes were obviously not like that.

Be it the ingredients, or the invested preparation, the food was worth to be put on the royal table.

The Three Troublemakers forgot all about the earlier exhaustion and cheered, whereupon Vanessa put a hand against her plump hip and laughed out loud.

“Hahaha. Of course. Her Majesty will not be back before night today, but we could not simple sit around during the ‘Special Training Period’, so we practiced some palace dishes today.

Her Majesty and Amanda approved it, of course, so help yourselves.”

The only way to improve your cooking skill was to actually cook the dishes. But it goes without saying that the food they cooked for “practice”, could not be served to their masters. Therefore the waiting maids occasionally played the role of a food taster.

“I won’t hold back then!”

“Provecho!”

“Wow, everything looks so good!”

The three girls reached out for the food with delighted expressions.

The Carpa Kingdom was the biggest provider of spices and salt, so its traditional dishes were all rich in taste.

Dolores scooped the contents of the bowl with a large wooden spoon and brought it to her mouth. The visual contrast between the red soup dyed by the spices and the green vegetables swimming in it, whetted the appetite for it.

When she swallowed the spicy soup complete with vegetables, she widened her eyes in surprise.

“Oh? The seasoning is just average?”

Her impression was too ambiguous with just that.

“Huh? What’re you talking about, Dolores?”

“Dolores-chan, I have no idea what you mean.”

“Just try it. Then you will understand.”

Dolores contradicted Fay, laying on her face, and Rethe.

Although tilting their heads puzzled, the two of them obeyed Dolores and tasted the soup, exclaiming in surprise afterwards.

“Oh, you’re right.”

“Yeah, this seasoning is not matched to Master Zenjirou. It is the traditional seasoning of the Palace.”

The easy-to-understand explanation was provided by Rethe, the most knowledgeable about cooking amongst the three.

Needless to say, the food in the Inner Palace was geared to the taste of Zenjirou and Aura.

The taste buds from Aura preferred the common food of the Carpa Kingdom, but the problem was Zenjirou.

As an open-minded citizen from Modern Japan, Zenjirou was not really picky about his food, but his preference was slightly different, when it came to the food from the different world.

He did not mind occasionally eating the typical aromatic grasses in his soup or the deliberately dry-aged meat, but he also disliked some dishes to the point of refusing to eat them on a daily basis.

For that reason, the dishes cooked in the Inner Palace were seasoned slightly different than the typical cooking in the Royal Palace, in order to suit his taste.

However, the food in front of the three maids right now was the “normal cuisine of the Royal Palace”.

Vanessa spoke to the surprised trio with a loud voice.

“Naturally. We were practicing today after all. Of course it is a good thing, when you can prepare the food according to Master Zenjirou’s taste, but that is only one practical application at best. Since we are having ’Special Training’, we might as well start from the very basics.”

In other words, they did not have to cook the food to suit the particular taste of their master, so they took that special opportunity to practice the standard dishes of the Royal Palace.

It certainly made sense to start cooking a standard menu for practice.

And above all, it was not really all that helpful for the future of the waiting maids, when they could cook the food according to the taste of someone from a different world.

In the future, they would leave the Inner Palace and marry someone, but their future husbands would surely be

disappointed, when they were served the custom-made food for Zenjirou instead of the traditional royal cuisine.

High-ranking nobles aside, the low-ranking nobles asked for cooking skills in a good wife for sure.

It was the quick-witted Dolores again, who interpreted the circumstances from the phrasing from Vanessa first.

"'Special Training'? You mean, this food was made by…"

Vanessa smirked in light of Dolores' remark.

"Yes, as you guessed, it was not me. The girls on cooking duty today made it. I was just keeping a close watch. So, how do you like it?"

Then she asked with a meaningful tone.

The first to answer her was Fay, who had stuffed her cheeks with the fried dragon meat.

"Hoo, is that so. I couldn't tell at all. It's really good!"

Fay gave an energetic opinion, but it was a well-known fact that her taste buds were shallow.

"Oh, really? What about you?"

With these words, Vanessa turned to Dolores and Rethe.

Asked about the practice cooking from the waiting maids, Dolores carefully picked up a flatbread, tore off a piece from the edge and put it into her mouth.

"Hmm, now that you mention it, it certainly tastes a bit different than what you make, Mrs. Vanessa."

Her cooking skills were not the best, but at least she was confident in her sense of taste, so she was the perfect candidate to ask an opinion of.

“Oh? And how exactly?”

Vanessa narrowed her eyes to slits amused, whereupon Dolores explained with a self-satisfied look.

“Yes. Simply put, the ingredients gave it away. The vegetables are cut up into quite differently sized pieces. If it had been made by you, they would have been cut more orderly.”

Hearing that, Rethe also added her own evaluation after she had finished the tasting.

“Indeed. The bread is a bit too chewy for my liking, too. My guess is that they kneaded the dough too much. The crust from some of the fried meat tasted a bit burnt as well. The temperature of the oil was probably too high.”

Rethe prided herself on being the best cook amongst the young waiting maids, so her commentary was even more detailed than the one from Dolores.

Although she looked as absent-minded as always, she definitely knew what she was talking about, when it came to cooking.

The evaluation from the two seemed to have pleased Vanessa.

She turned around and said with a loud voice.

“You heard them. The guests were not satisfied. I am going to work you hard in the afternoon, so look forward to it.”

For the first time then, Fay and the other two noticed that their colleagues were standing behind them.

The faces of their colleagues were obviously contorted and reminded them of something. Yes, namely of their own faces some moments ago, when they had received the “Special Training” from Supervisory Maid Amanda.

“Oh, Keyshia?”

“Ops. Did you make this soup, Conchita?”

“Oh, hi, Sabrina-chan!”

Remaining seated in their chairs, Fay, Dolores and Rethe called out to the three co-workers that had appeared behind their backs at some point.

All of them were tall, albeit not as tall as Dolores, and had big breasts, albeit not as voluminous as Rethe.

This was nothing surprising, since the young waiting maids were originally chosen to match Zenjirou’s preference, namely being similar to Aura: buxom and tall.

If anything, the petite Fay and slender Dolores were an exception.

These stylish tall girls were now looking at them with a painful expression. The girl named Sabrina was even breaking out in tears.

With tears in their eyes, they accused Dolores and Rethe with a sore voice.

“I’ll remember this, Dolores…!”

“I really hate your honest nature in regards to food now, Rethe…”

“Oh man, I wish Dolores and Rethe had the same sense of taste as Fay.”

“Hahaha. The judgement has been passed already. Give it up. Fear not, I am a good teacher. You will be trained properly, so that you will not embarrass yourself anywhere.”

Saying that, Vanessa slapped the girls on the back.

“Looks like we aren’t the only ones in a pinch.”

Fay assessed with a look of amazement, whereupon Dolores agreed with a wry smile.

“The ‘Special Training’ applies to everyone after all.”

They would get special instructions from Supervisory Maid Amanda in the afternoon as well, but precisely because of that, it would be unfair if their colleagues were to have it pretty cushy.

Comrade-in-arms perishing together, bound for hell.

Dolores smirked sinister and peeked at the soup synthetically, then severely criticized the substance with a look like an evil stepmother.

“Oh my, on a closer look, I see that this soup has a bit too much herbs in it. And the slightly bitter taste was probably due to too much heat.”

“Oh, you are right. The flatbread is not just chewy, but seems to be a bit charred, too. I guess it was too long in the oven?”

Rethe played along, but in her case, it happened completely unconsciously.

Having said this, it made little different to the victims, whether it was wittingly or unwittingly.

“Dolores… You’ll pay for this!”

“I know you mean no harm, Rethe, but some things just cannot be forgiven.”

“This will have consequences…!”

The three waiting maids looked like they were possessed by a devil and Vanessa yelled with laugher, as she seemed to like what she saw.

“Kuahahaha. You don’t say! You don’t say so! Then I will have to teach them plentiful.

First we will practice swaying the pan. Then we will practice mincing on the leftover vegetables. And lastly, we might as well play around with the oven, since we have enough firewood.”

In light of these words, the three waiting maids looked like they wanted to run far away at once, if that were actually to be allowed.

Needless to say, Vanessa would not got easy on them during all that. She was admittedly known for the most pleasant-natured treatment of the young waiting maids amongst all the department heads in the Inner Palace, but she was anything but a lenient superior, when it came to work.

“Well then, lamenting will not get anywhere. Hush, hush, back to work.”

“Yes…”

With an apathetic smile, Dolores watched her colleagues trot off back to their work after Vanessa had given them a slap on the bottom. Then Vanessa suddenly turned around and called out to her.

“You girls sure are brave. Not like it is unrelated to you.”

“Huh?”

“Eh?”

“Fueh?”

The unexpected utterance prompted Fay and the others to raise a dumbfounded voice.

“I mean, it IS called ‘Special Training Period’. Do you think it would end with just the department you are currently in? During the one month stay of Master Zenjirou in Valentia, everyone of you will go through the ‘Special Training’ for each department at least once.

To make that possible, the shift rotations will be sooner. If I remember correctly, you three are supposed to come to me in three days.”

“…”

“…”

“Woah, really? I will do my best, Mrs. Vanessa!”

Only Rethe happily clapped her hands together in front of her huge breasts, whereas Fay and Dolores stared at each other wordlessly.

Dolores looked especially bad.

Remembering what she had said just now, she smiled to keep up appearance, but broke out in a cold sweat and spoke to Vanessa with a coaxing voice.

“M- Mrs. Vanessa? I might have said a bit too much in my earlier appraisal, so, well… What I want to say is, the food was good enough. So, if possible, I would like you to be not all that hard on Conchita and the others during the Special Training…”

But her words were dismissed by the waiting maids in question: Conchita and the other two.

“No, that will not be necessary, Mrs. Vanessa.”

“Yes, we have already come to terms with it.”

“We will do our utmost.”

These admirable words left their mouths, but their faces showed a sinister smile.

All three of them directed that dark smile at Dolores

“You see, Dolores.”

“We will be tasting your cooking in three days.”

“Look forward to it…!”

as they declared excessively satisfying.

“Really? Yay, that will be fun. I will do my best!”

Again, it was only Rethe, who displayed a carefree enthusiasm.

“Hey, Dolores!? Could it be that I’m being dragged into your mess here!?”

“D- Don’t ask me! They must be joking. Hey, you’re joking, right? Conchita? Keyshia? Sabrina? Say something!”

When Fay snarled at her, Dolores panicked and had to resort to poor excuses.

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